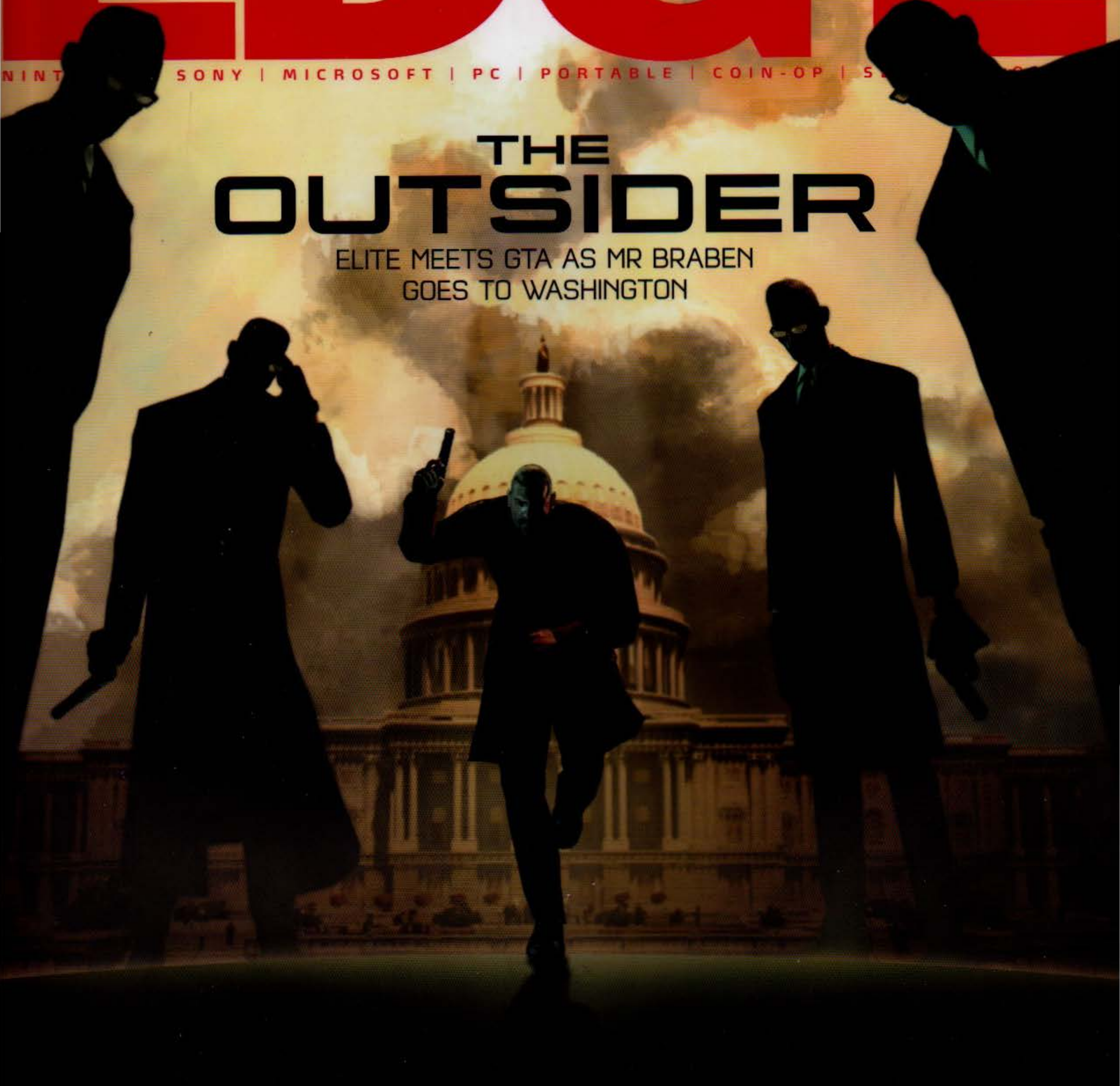
VIDEOGAME CULTURE

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THE OUTSIDER

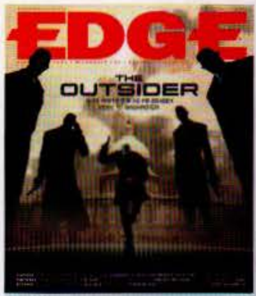
ELITE MEETS GTA AS MR BRABEN GOES TO WASHINGTON

FEATURES WHAT REALLY HAPPENED TO CORE DESIGN **FAHRENHEIT'S DAVID CAGE PREDICTS THE FUTURE** DO GAME DESIGNERS STEAL?

PREVIEWED SONIC THE HEDGEHOG **GOD HAND** LORD OF THE RINGS ONLINE **MERCURY MELTDOWN** TEST DRIVE UNLIMITED **B-BOY**

REVIEWED HALF-LIFE 2: EPISODE ONE **LOCO ROCO** TITAN QUEST **FORBIDDEN SIREN 2** MONKEY BALL ADVENTURE **MICRO MACHINES V4**





Since the birth of the last generation of consoles, commentators have been predicting that succeeding generations would find it harder and harder to present consumers with a clear leap in the quality of the graphics. And this year it seems to have come true, with a number of early titles falling victim to that sense of 'same-but-better'. Of course, the new machines can still astound – but only if you buy a new display that's equal to the task. Worse, the old machines are still biting at their heels, with the spectacles promised by *Okami*, *Final Fantasy XII* and *God Of War 2* eating in to the advantage the new technology offers.

So should we be dismayed? Is the impetus that drives gaming hardware forward starting to run out of steam? On the contrary: this shift marks the moment when gaming can stop concentrating on the boring stuff – making cars and crates and bushes look good – and start concentrating on the real next-generation concerns: AI, physics and animation. This issue we talk to three of gaming's Dr Frankensteins. Quantic Dream's David Cage explains on p50 how he can populate your new hardware with characters who truly look like people. LucasArts' Jim Ward asserts on p14 that he has the technology to make them move like people; and David Braben, one of the co-creators of *Elite*, outlines on p56 his plan for the most audacious aim of all: to make them act like people.

Of course, such ambitions aren't new to gaming – take a trip back to 1983's *Twin Kingdom Valley* on p102 to revisit a world where artificial and human intelligence fought it out on the level playing field of a virtual world. But what is new is that these goals are becoming tangible, something the whole world can see and understand rather than something gamers take on trust from stat-sheets and data-tables. With that on offer, it's the idea of comparing polygon counts that looks to be running out of steam.



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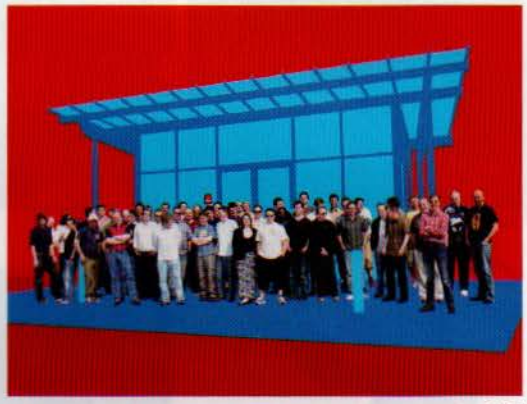
This month











Every month

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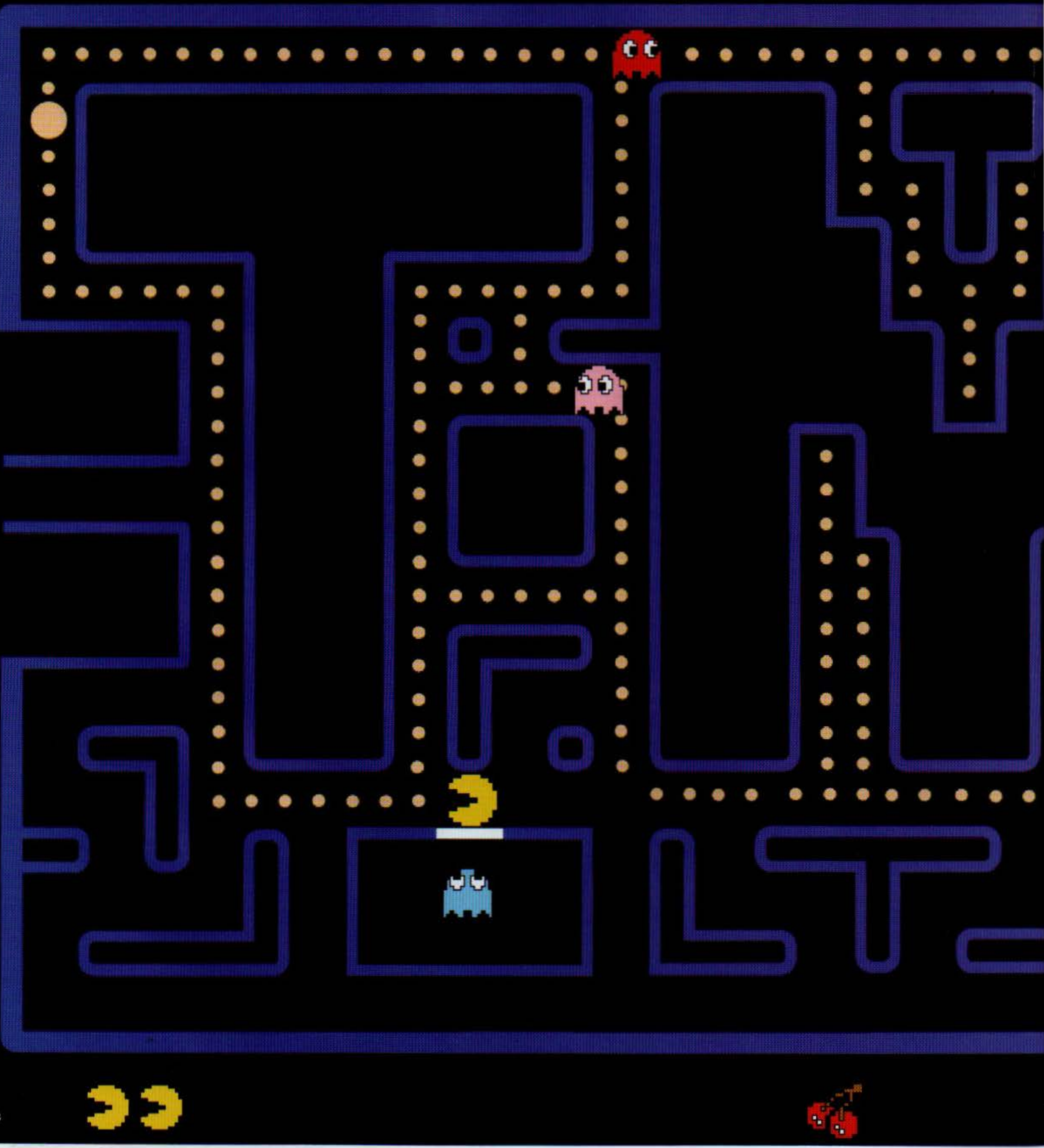
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PUBLISHING

Escaping the IP maze

No one wants their ideas stolen, but are software ownership laws doing more harm than good?

Gaming's an incestuous affair. The vast majority of its products bear more than a passing resemblance to one or more others, and from top to tail the concepts of most games can be distilled through mere comparison. "It's *Halo* with a US marine," you'll hear, "*Burnout* with bullets" or "*Unreal Tournament* with a wheel-mounted cat." But while it's long been common practice to share ideas and technology, there are some so-called clones that really earn that label (or rather, really try to dodge it). How many times have you seen a HUD, character or interaction that not even Phoenix Wright could defend? Worse still, a game that follows another's path to the nearest footstep, but in differently coloured shoes? Welcome to the shallow-end of intellectual property law.

Once, when game development was speedier, hardware development slower and the concept of the franchise weaker, this was almost all there was. Copyright (the right to publish a tangible finished product) was then seen as being the only form of IP applicable to videogames. "Forms of intellectual property such as copyright and trademarks generally apply in a straightforward way to games," explains **Chris Bennett**, a lawyer specialising in videogames at Davis & Company LLP, and a VideoGameLawBlog.com co-author. "For example, elements such as the storylines and music are all forms of artistic expression protected by copyright laws. Furthermore, a game's source code is also protected by copyright, while trademarks can protect the titles and likeness of characters should they be distinctive."

Essentially, while you can't protect the idea of a particular videogame through copyright, you can protect the expression of that idea. Copyright holders have exercised this authority time and again with suits against their less canny, or more audacious, imitators. Time Warp's *Great Giana Sisters* – a carbon copy of *Super Mario Bros* – is a notorious example, released on Amiga and C64 by Rainbow Arts and promptly pulled from shelves under pressure from Nintendo's ever-watchful legal department.

"Forms of intellectual property such as copyright and trademarks generally apply in a straightforward way to games"

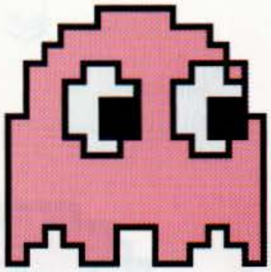


The patented Sanity System in *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem* seems too specific to be dangerous, but the devil's in the details

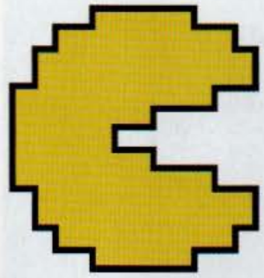
Quite how dissimilar one game has to be from another to avoid the same fate is only vaguely defined by law, but the key words are 'substantial similarity.' If your new game involves a character hurdling bottomless pits via rising platforms, collecting objects that protect them against a single hit, then you're fine. If that character's a blue hedgehog collecting giant rings then you're in trouble. Though it's a perennial concern for publishers and developers, copyright ownership is at least coherently defined, which is more than can be said for the patent system.

Mark Phillips, a partner at entertainment law firm Harbottle & Lewis, describes the patent as "the ultimate monopoly right, and the king of IP." An extremely valuable business asset that must be applied for within a year of an invention being offered for sale, a patent protects innovations in software, hardware or any other such field – not just ideas, but designed and documented solutions to specific problems. In a copyright case, there is no filed declaration of ownership – a plaintiff has to prove that the defendant knowingly copied their idea, and that the idea in question was their own to begin with. A patent is more tangible, existing as an explicitly documented, legally recognised proof of ownership. With games constituting increasing numbers of software modules, each with a potentially different inventor, patents come into their own by protecting those components. They can't protect the code itself, but they can protect the manner in which its applied.

Patent law can be a blunt instrument, however, and its rising governance over the bricks and mortar of videogames is controversial. Many







Country filings

Why are most cases fought on American soil?

Practically all the high-profile patent-infringement suits pertaining to games have been filed in the US, and relate to patents granted in that country. In the UK, thanks to a European Patent Convention ruling that makes software exempt from patentability, copyright has remained the dominant form of protected IP. But whether or not a patent is approved is ultimately decided on a national rather than supranational level, and while the UK Patent Office has remained averse to the practice of granting software patents, UK courts are said to be more open. The lack of an overarching decision-making process has led to disharmony in the European patent system, and securing a patent on videogame technology remains a more troublesome endeavour than it is in the US.





industry insiders see dire portents in the cases of small developer A versus publishing patent-holder B, or similarly publisher C versus dormant patent-holder D. The latter was exemplified in 1997, with a lawsuit brought against 3D Realms (then Apogee) by the attorney of US patent-holder Craig Enokian. Apogee chairman Scott Miller's first public response began: "There's a patent that could shake the game industry to its core."

"Software is an area that advances far too quickly, and something that is non-obvious one month becomes conventional wisdom a month later"

Issued back in 1987, that patent opens with the following definition: "A video game in which a television screen or cathode ray tube is used to display a variety of plays previously performed by living beings and recorded at the time on a video recording medium." Apogee's *Duke Nukem 3D*, Enokian claimed, made an unauthorised use of his invention, and warranted immediate withdrawal from sale and manufacture. Miller, though he was quick to protest the case, found greater cause for concern in the issuance of what he called an "absurd patent." The invention described within, he believed, could be made unjustifiably relevant to almost any FMV-enhanced game.

As it happened, Miller's prophecy didn't come to pass. But his anxieties weren't without the support of history. The precedent for games industry core-shaking had actually been set back in 1973, when Ralph Baer's patent for a 'television gaming and training apparatus' (US Patent #3,728,480) essentially cast its net so wide that patent owner Magnavox took Seeburg, Atari and Bally-Midway to court, before walking away with a historic victory and healthy royalty share in *Pong* (Baer's Videogames: In The Beginning provides further insight for those that are interested, while **E**151 features an extract).

What Miller would later discover was that the patent system, when confronted with gaming's myriad technologies and frantic pace, had become a quagmire of legal and ethical issues. "I'd be happy to see all software patents abolished," he declares. "Software is an area that advances far too quickly, and something that is non-obvious one month becomes conventional wisdom a month later. Seventeen years of patent protection for most software patents is like two centuries worth of protection for your average non-software patent." That in itself is giving traditionally-schooled developers nightmares. Some believe that the very existence of arcane software patents will retard or even stall the growth of gaming as a whole, with the right to adapt existing ideas coming at a prohibitive premium. Others accept the need for protection of ideas in an industry where plagiarism, to differing degrees, is almost ubiquitous, but agree that the current system is flawed. Also, many such as Miller believe that the founding tenet of the patent system is now being abused.

Bennett sees patent protection working well for the game companies that own them, but is quick to flip the coin: "They're causing some uncertainty in the industry because it's difficult and expensive to do the due diligence necessary to avoid patent landmines, especially the ones that are still buried." He alludes to the shadow industry of patent enforcement, known widely as patent trolling, where lawyers hammer companies with claims based on so-called bad patents, or patents acquired purely for the purpose of legal gamesmanship. The former constitute inventions that existed elsewhere at the time of an application, or that are deemed so obvious that they deserve no protection at all. A popular example is the patent granted to Compton's New Media in 1993 following a claim that it essentially invented multimedia (US Patent 5,241,671).



An intriguing chapter in game patent history, the fight over the shadowing technique known as Carmack's Reverse saw id Software reluctantly bow to Creative. *Doom 3*'s addition of EAX 3D support was the eventual settlement



Nintendo's threats towards Rainbow Arts over *Great Giana Sisters* weren't just a reaction to its audacity. The Japanese giant explicitly wanted to keep *Mario*'s formula on its own hardware

Originally devised to encourage technology sharing, patents were conceived as a contract between an inventor and society at large. In exchange for the benefit an invention would bring to the people, its creator would receive a monopoly over it for a given period of time. As Phillips notes, gaming is subject to a somewhat altered interpretation: "The art of the modern patent is to draft it in such a broad way that it's easy to infringe, but in such a convoluted way as to make it almost impossible to understand." Nintendo's recent patent of *Eternal Darkness*' 'sanity system' is seen as a classic example of a patent troll snare, its description running to over 5,000 words in length, and the minutiae of its application eminently reproducible.

For small-scale developers, it's a legitimate worry – yet another David and Goliath battle to add to the gauntlet, only this time one in which Goliath can click his fingers and have David simply vanish through a trap door. Patent-empowered publishers could conceivably use demand for their systems and techniques to grab increased control over developer-owned IP. Alternatively, they could simply starve developers before preying on what remains, or wait until one of their shrewdly-concealed patent landmines is trodden on. But patent law doesn't discriminate when it comes to being exploited. "It works in reverse too," notes Bennett. "RIM is a great example of this. AVG is another, although it's more of a litigation machine than a development company."

RIM (Research In Motion) is the wireless solutions manufacturer behind the popular Blackberry wireless platform, and its protracted legal battle with patent-holding company NTP represents such a low point in patent law's chequered past that it's seen by some observers as a potential catalyst for widespread reform. It is, in fact, a trolling masterclass. "These companies have no intention to create a product," says Miller. "All they intend to do is exploit companies that do make consumer products, and that is just wrong from any angle you look at it." Founded by Thomas Campana Jr, a communications engineer who owned eight 1991 patents related to the transmission of emails through paging networks, NTP's sole function was to administer and economically exploit those patents, which it did over four years at the expense of alleged patent-infringer RIM, culminating in an out-of-court settlement of over $600 million.

AVG (American Video Graphics), meanwhile, acquired a series of patents filed in 1987 by



SMB2's camera system leaves you in little doubt as to how AVG's lawyers managed to win their case against Sega. The publisher's understandable ignorance of the spherical panning patent proved an inadequate legal defence



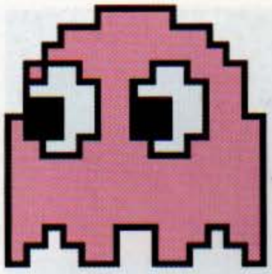
Shakermaker

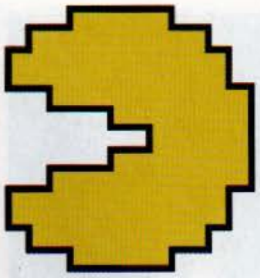
How Immersion rumbled the industry's biggest names

Settling a patent infringement case doesn't necessarily denote guilt – the accused may simply wish to cut their losses and avoid punitive damages. But it's not uncommon for defendants, in the hardware realm especially, to stick their hand up and pay their dues. The suit that Immersion Corp brought against Microsoft and Sony for their alleged infringement of its haptic technologies patent provides insight into what happens when you do and don't concede, and hints at the defendants' differing mindsets. Though the technologies that put the rumble into controllers such as the DualShock would have been developed independently of Immersion's own, that company's analyses of both Microsoft and Sony's hardware, together with over 600 related patents that it owns, put forward a compelling case.

It's old news for Microsoft now, the company having settled for $26 million and licensed Immersion's technology to replace its own. But Sony, faced with a demand for $299 million – an estimated 1.37 per cent in royalties on $5 billion of sold PS2s – stood its ground, and for it the case continues. In September 2004, a federal jury awarded Immersion approximately $90 million in damages, and an injunction was awarded to prohibit Sony's sale of the related hardware – an injunction the Japanese giant continues to contest in the courts. Its reasoning is the subject of both debate and concern. Does it see acquiescence as an intolerable admission of guilt, or is Immersion's proposal of greater financial impact than some observers suggest?











Sega sued everyone behind *The Simpsons: Road Rage*, developer included, over its similarity to *Crazy Taxi*. Ironically, the concept might actually have been devised in 1994 by a Disney executive

Newswire



Daylite robbery

When Chinese website Sina Games reported the theft of US$2.32 million in black DS Lites this month, it was hard to establish which were higher in number: units stolen or interpretations of the story. Some took the value of the shipment, which was said to be headed to Europe, to mean 18,000 units. Others believed the story to be a ruse by Nintendo, with immediate counter-claims that this was distinctly out of character. Another suggestion was that HK$1 million had been offered by Hong Kong police for information, but this was again met with doubt. For those awaiting their units, an official announcement can't come soon enough...







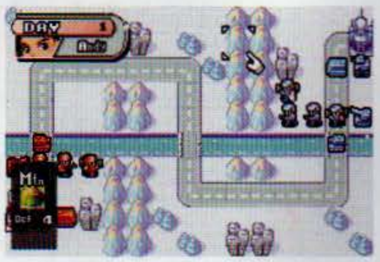
Legal advisors Chris Bennett (top) and Mark Phillips (middle) have watched the patent issue escalate into an industry anxiety. Scott Miller (below) of 3D Realms has first hand experience of its shortcomings

William G Waller of innovations company Tektronix, Inc. Two of those, bought in 2004, had particularly far-reaching implications for common console development practices, and the company proceeded to sue 12 separate publishers for infringement. The primary technology involved was that of spherical panning – a camera movement and zoom technique in which the camera moves around a specific focal object. In its case against Sega, the company's lawyers cited *Super Monkey Ball 2* as an offending example. Recent financial filings by Atari, meanwhile, disclosed an AVG-related settlement of $300,000.

So the existing patent system leaves everyone vulnerable, and all but the most diligent unsure of where they stand. It's an equality that brings no balance to the games industry, and instead fosters a growing sense of discord. That many would see the enforcement of such a system abolished isn't altogether surprising, but Bennett proposes alternative possibilities: "The patent system does make room for this type of innovation. In particular, if the original developer or inventor patents the original invention, then a subsequent developer or inventor can still patent a subsequent invention (assuming it's otherwise patentable). Of course, developer number two can't use developer number one's invention without a licence, just like developer number three can't use developer number two's invention without a licence." In short, game makers can still stand on the shoulders of giants to further the medium, but only if they pay for the privilege.

"Game developers and publishers need to understand that they can't necessarily use a technique or method of gameplay in their game, even if everyone else in the industry is doing it. The console manufacturers learned this the hard way with the Immersion lawsuit (see 'Shakermaker'). The problem is that patents are long, complex and hard to understand. Some people argue that the industry would be better served if nobody needed a licence to build upon previous innovation. But the counter-argument is that developers might be less likely to spend R&D funds on development if they knew a competitor could grab their expensive invention and use it for free."

All of which are valid points, offering little in the way of consolation to those most perturbed by that minefield of potential litigation. But is whether they're perturbed the real issue? Are they even prepared? Phillips believes not: "People throughout the history of game development have constantly borrowed ideas. Developers haven't had





A change of visual perspective belies the similarities between SOE's *Field Commander* (top) and *Advance Wars* (above). With units, terrain and abilities being shared by both, the former's debts are unarguable



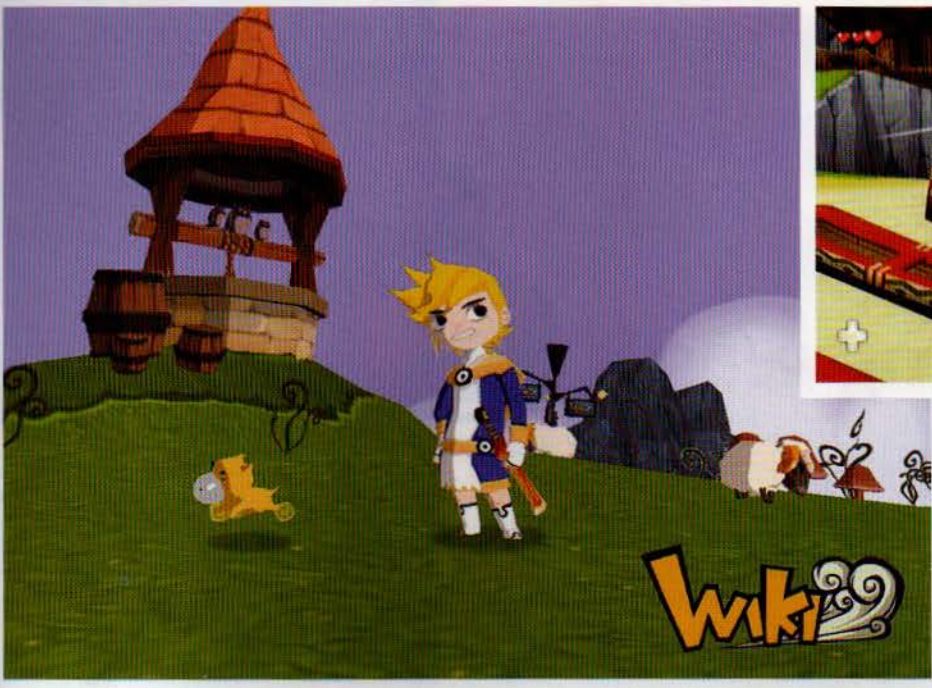


While Rockstar's *San Andreas* (top) has a vividly individual identity, *Saint's Row* (above) is yet to achieve the same distinction. Its E3 showing opened with direct confirmation of its *GTA* inspirations





Mitchell's *Puzz Loop* (top) preceded PopCap's hugely successful *Zuma* (above) by five years. While no legal action has been taken, awkward comparisons persist with *Puzz Loop* DS, reviewed this issue as *Magnetica*





Webzen's *Wiki* mired itself in controversy with little assistance from Nintendo. An explicit telling off from the *Zelda* creator drew the attention; the blatant similarities did the rest

in-house legal departments, or indeed the money to afford both them and due diligence. It's one thing looking to see if your game's trademarked, but even for a patent agent it's going to be phenomenally difficult to ensure your latest invention doesn't infringe. The other thing is that a game evolves during development, so it's an ongoing process. In theory a developer can do a patent search themselves, but is it practical to do that? No. There's been a suggestion that the IGDA set up some kind of database, but is that feasible? Probably not."

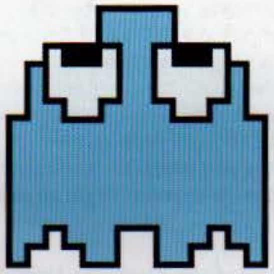
A future where the minefield is defused, and where developers of lesser means aren't left to run blindly through in the hope of safe passage doesn't seem likely. Furthermore, the prospect of effective legal reform isn't helped by the almost complete lack of previously contested patents. Very few infringement cases have been resolved in the courtroom, and while settlements are a more amicable path to take, they abandon any attempt to take the supposed bad patents to task. Supposing, in gaming's likeliest future, that these exploitative patents cause the gravest miscarriages of justice. How is the law to identify them without a profile to look out for?

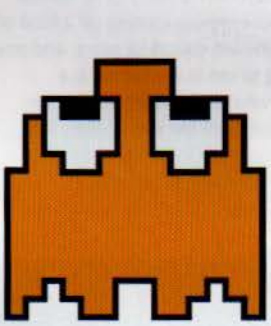
But Phillips has a refreshingly frank and uncomplicated theory that keeps him upbeat. If you're at risk, he suggests, then perhaps you're the lucky one: "Patent trolls are only going to wake up and take issue if a game has been successful. If it hasn't then it's not going to hit anybody's radar. So for 90 per cent of the industry, it's not an issue. Furthermore, at the point where you become successful, you should be in a position to find a publisher and fight any litigation. Patent awareness is going to become a day-to-day business decision, and there'll be plenty of times, for plenty of people, where it just isn't worth the effort."

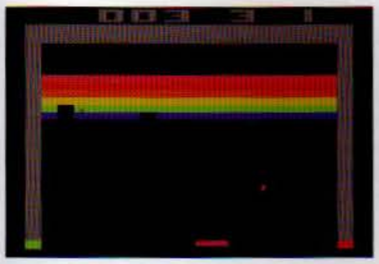
No way out?

The IGDA is trying to solve the problem of patents

Sadly, much of the more practical, optimistic thinking about software patents is just that – proposition rather than prospect. The IGDA Intellectual Property Rights Committee's inaugural white paper, published in 2003, ends with a series of opinion essays, the last of which is a suggestion of a more balanced relationship between publisher and developer. It proposes a new IP ownership and exploitation paradigm, whereby the developer retains control over much of its intellectual property when dealing with a publisher. So if a studio is commissioned to work on a licensed product, then any technical innovations developed as a result should remain that studio's property to exploit in the future as it sees fit. Likewise, if a publisher chooses to market a developer's original IP, it's proposed that the developer licenses it as part of a fixed-term publishing deal, but again retains ownership.









Arkanoid is often regarded as the first *Breakout* (top) clone, but Sega's *Gigas* (bottom) arrived in arcades earlier. Amusingly, it was the latter game's upgrades that gave the concept legs, and Taito that profited





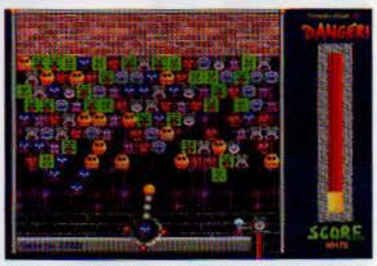
The perceived impudence of videogame cloning can be affected by its context. *Miami Vice* (above) makes plenty of clever decisions that make its minigame's similarity to *Every Extend Extra* (top) seem acceptable





Months of legal scuffling between Atari and North American Philips led to the discontinuation of the dot gobbling *K.C. Munchkin!* (above). Though *Pac-Man* (top) won out, its home port was the inferior game





Considering that it's a wholesale rip-off, it's amazing how often Dave Dobson's *Snoob* (above) dodges comparison with its senior, Taito's *Puzzle Bobble* (top). In 2001, it was the ninth most played desktop game



Ward's warning words



The man leading LucasArts' renaissance thinks gaming is heading down a dead end

Jim Ward has been president of LucasArts for just over two years, but in that short time the company has over-written the disappointments of *Star Wars: Episode III Revenge Of The Sith* and *Republic Commando* with successes like *Battlefront II* and new projects like *Mercenaries*. His years of experience marketing for Microsoft Windows, Nike and Apple give him an outsider's perspective on gaming, but his message to the industry is one many gamers would endorse: innovate or die.

LucasArts has a very distinct heritage. How would you sum up what the company stands for now?

Well, that's a big question. Look, you're familiar with the fact this company is coming off a kind of turnaround from the last couple of years, and now what you're going to see in our games is a representation of what we've been striving for, which is to really enhance the role of story and characters in videogames. To that end, Peter [Hirschmann, vice president of product development] has done a phenomenal job of going out and investing in technology that will really bring that to life, particularly in terms of characters, and one of our first steps was to recognise that in order for videogame characters to come to life they have to be read as real, you have to be able to really believe in them, and there are a couple of levels to that. One is the bio-mechanical level – you have to believe in their body – and one is at the AI Turing level, which I don't think next-gen will get us to, but it's definitely what we're working towards. And if people came away from this E3 and said: "Wow, LucasArts is back to the quality level that it once had, and is certainly back on the bleeding edge of technology," then I'm a happy camper because it's the truth.

Games seem constantly to set themselves the hardest benchmark, which is to 'do' people, whereas games like *Lego Star Wars* show you can create engaging characters without that technological challenge. Do you think games have to aim at realistic human characters, or are there other avenues?

Games can do a number of things. At the end of the day, are you having fun with the game? That's all that matters, and how you get there isn't really the issue, as long as you do. But the thing with this industry is that it's focused on next gen, and what that means to them is pretty graphics, and that's not what it's about any more. And, the majority of this industry is focused on making games and selling them to the same blokes that they've been selling to for the past six years. We've got to broaden the audience, and the way you do that is by making games that are more appealing, through great stories and great characters and great gameplay. That's what we're trying to do, and how we get to it I don't entirely care, as long as we get to an experience which is pleasurable.

In terms of widening that demographic, what's your take on Nintendo's approach?

Look, I applaud Nintendo's approach. I applaud their vision. We need to get smarter about the platform, but I have every intention of supporting it. I support anyone in this industry who understands what we all have to do, which is fundamentally change how we do things. We either get past that tipping point on this cycle, or we will be relegated to a niche industry that isn't going to go anywhere. This is our moment in time. And if Nintendo can grasp that, then fantastic. I applaud Microsoft, because they have, in effect, created a back-end revenue model which will help us with the overall business model, which doesn't work right now. We need a back-end revenue stream, so any kind of online activity – Marketplace, Arcade, downloadable content – is great, and I applaud Sony because they're doing it a different way. And then thirdparty and firstparty developers, content developers have *got* to start creating games that are not for the same old audience, and unfortunately at E3 you see a lot of the same old kind of stuff over and over again and we've got to broaden it up. That's why we've got *Traction*, it's why we're doing *Thrillville* – we've got to start making games for eight-year-old girls.

Isn't there a big marketing challenge involved in targeting projects at consumers who have already decided that gaming isn't for them?

Yeah, sure, fair enough. But I'll tell you what, if you have a great game and take it to market in the right way, it will happen. Look, I spent ten years of my life marketing Star Wars, and everyone told me: "Women don't like Star Wars, so why even go after them?" Well guess what, we increased the women's market for Star Wars by over 124 per cent since 1997, I mean you can do it, you just have to create a product that's viable and take it to market the right way. But this industry will default to 18-





Indiana Jones 2007 **is the highest profile of LucasArts' new games, and the standard bearer for its investment in cutting-edge tools to generate animation and physics behaviour**





Thrillville (left) draws on developer Frontier's experience with *Rollercoaster Tycoon*, and leads LucasArts' charge for more accessible titles – alongside the entirely irresistible *Lego Star Wars II* (above)

year-old guys and heavy metal riffs and do-do-do-do-do-do-do-BOOM-BOOM and every trailer the same and every game the same – if you walk around E3 it's just dragons and guns and sheesh! There's a whole market out there, but the industry's remained flat for six years. We've got to break out of it. *We're* going to do it, for our part, but the whole industry needs to do it.

It's clear you feel the clock is ticking fast, and that the crunch will hit this generation. Are you hopeful that the industry will turn itself around quickly enough?

Yes. We have to. Look, this business, the game business, is 25 years old – older than that, even – and there have been industries that popped up three years ago that now gross more than we do. Our competition isn't other game companies, it's other forms of entertainment. We have to support each other, bond together, and create for interactive gaming a significant part of mindshare, so people think about it. That means we need to get consoles into households, it means we have to have content that drives wanting a console in the first place and if we don't do it this generation it's not going to sustain itself any more. Because the costs are too high versus the install base. We're at the end of the road of this business model. We can't afford it any more. The margins are just too thin. The whole thing is at risk of imploding and falling in on itself. It really is – I believe that.

"We're at the end of the road of this business model. We can't afford it any more. The margins are just too thin. The whole thing is at risk of imploding and falling in on itself"

Is there one point where that change should start? It often seems like everybody in the industry needs something else to change before they can start to evolve.

Yeah, it's content. Content is king and I think everyone who develops games has to adopt a new point of view. Now, selfishly I would say they need to adopt our point of view, because we think we've got the right idea – I think I have the right idea [laughs]. But I think companies have to fundamentally change the way they're making games, change the philosophies around those games. Look, with all due respect, you cannot miss a movie launch with your movie game. We've been there, and did that, and learned it was the wrong thing to do. So if you've got a big movie like Superman coming out, you better be there with your game. There are some fundamentals in this business: we have a philosophy – kick-ass games on time and on budget. Failure in any one of those points is failure for the project. That's not because I'm some kind of accountant who wants to make sure we don't overspend, it's because of the dynamic of the industry if you want to make money.

So if you'd inherited the problem which EA faced with Superman, which choice would you have made? On time and flawed, or delayed and improved?

No. I don't accept that. I would have shipped it at the highest quality, and on time and on budget. There is no failure. There is no compromise. That's the fundamental problem in this business, the premise that people work from. If you speak to old-timers they say if you want a great game it's going to take more time and more money and we can't ship it because if we do we'll ruin the franchise. No guys, don't get yourselves into that situation. Make it great – it will be great – and we're going to be on time and on budget. Failure is no option. You can't get yourself into those situations. You have to have great people and great producers, great systems and great platforms. You can't default into that "Oh, it's not so good, we'll take some more time and blow it out of the fourth quarter" and then launch something like *The Godfather* and have it be DOA. I'm not second-guessing any of those decisions, but I'm suggesting that the business model does not allow you to do that any more.

We have a company called ILM [Industrial Light And Magic] and they've been doing this for years. They have a director come in and say: "I have my movie launching on May 19, worldwide, in 164 different countries, I've got a 2,500 shot list, and I can't be late on that, and here's the budget that the studio gave me, and I can't go over that, and by the way none of those shots have ever been done before." So what does ILM do? They write new code, they innovate and they get it done on time and on budget. That's their business.

Do you think the games industry exists too much in a bubble, and that there aren't enough people in it who know how the rest of the world gets things done?

Well, I don't know about that, but I do think it's very insular, it's embryonic, it's unsophisticated – it's full of people who are much happier making games for their friends in their garage, back like it was in the '90s. And it's a sin that we haven't figured that out, that we haven't broken out of it yet. And it shows in the numbers. What other industry, that's supposed to be the leading edge of entertainment would be flat for six years? I mean *man*, that is not healthy, and it just reeks and screams for change. Radical change, and that's certainly what we've done in our company. But I need the whole industry to do that.



WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

After inauspicious beginnings as the LiveJournal of Philadelphia Inquirer game columnist Dennis McCauley, then dedicated to light news and opinion on government reaction to game violence related issues, Game Politics came to the fore in the wake of the Hot Coffee incident and has since become essentially the clearing house for news on political activity in the games arena.

In more recent months the site has extensively tracked and covered the surge in violent game legislation cropping up across the US at an astounding rate and the industry's battles to protect itself from outside forces. It's also, if the volumes of comments each post typically garners are to be believed, one of the few public forums frequented by anti-games lawyer Jack Thompson, with vague but cutting screeds emerging at least once a month.

Other features on the site have included a now neglected podcast which interviews Thompson and the creator of the Hot Coffee mod, and a tracker to see how far violent game legislation has spread and at what stage newly proposed bills remain. But by far its most valuable resource and asset is its undeviating and relentless focus on its singular subject.

Site: **Game Politics**
URL: **http://www.gamepolitics.com**



SOUND BYTES

"These things tend to have a window. Right now that product is *World Of WarCraft*, so the idea would be to time something for when that product is going to be on its downward slope. To come out with something competitive now I think would be misguided for anyone, including THQ."
THQ president and CEO Brian Farrell pencils his firm's entry into the MMO market for around 2015

"There is no Pauline Kael of videogame writing. There is no Lester Bangs of videogame writing. And I'm starting to suspect there will never be that kind of authoritative critical voice within the world of videogames... If nobody ever thinks about these games in a manner that's human and metaphorical and contextual, they'll all become strictly commodities, and then they'll all become boring."
Someone tell American journalist Chuck Klosterman that we're stocked in Barnes & Noble

"If you work for FASA and you are reading this then I welcome you to take the shuttle over to my office and punch me the face. Seriously: I won't be offended since your damn game just kicked me in the metaphoric balls."
Philip Richardson, a Microsoft CRM program manager, on *Shadowrun*



INTERVIEW

Tekken fights its way onto PSP

From arcade cab to pocket treat: Namco's ambitions haven't shrunk

With the PSP suffering from the perception that it lacks quality titles, the forthcoming conversion of *Tekken: Dark Resurrection* should be cause for celebration – particularly in Japan. But porting a cutting-edge arcade title to the PS2's little sister was never going to be easy. We sat down with *Dark Resurrection*'s lead programmer **Tomokazu Matsumara**, its lead graphic designer **Naohiro Hayashi** and veteran *Tekken* director **Katsuhiro Harada** to discuss minigames, the current state of the arcade scene and getting the most out of Sony's handheld.

"We had to make everything again – models, textures. The team developed this PSP version from scratch. This is not a conversion, it's a completely new development"

What made you choose the PSP over the PS2 for *Tekken: Dark Resurrection*?

KH: We developed *T:DR* for the arcade. While we were making the game we had an offer to work on the PSP. We were told it was similar to the PS2 and with a few modifications the game would run. But when we opened the box, we realised it was not an easy process at all. We had to make everything again – models, textures. The team developed this PSP version from scratch. This is not a conversion, it's a completely new development.

What kind of problems did you encounter during that development?

TM: The first half of our development was a long and painful process to identify the CPU potential. It took a lot of time before we knew what the PSP could deliver. We were really tempted to modify the game to make the process easier but we realised that would not be *Tekken* any more. So we kept all the elements that make the game a true *Tekken* title, including the 60fps frame rate, and tried to gain performance by working on other elements.

NH: Of course we had to re-touch the visuals. The people in charge of the graphics had an incredible task to perform: we've managed to save machine power and still offer high-quality graphics, but this did not come easily. There is not a single polygon or texture identical to the original left.

Have *Tekken* fans welcomed your move to the PSP?

KH: I've heard that people in Europe and the US are excited about our game, but in Japan they are much more severe. I think it's because of the different approach they have in looking at what we are doing. In Japan, users see the PS2 as a training tool for when they fight other players in the arcade. We've had people complaining because they don't have a PSP and don't plan to buy one. There are also other people who are asking us if it is possible to plug an arcade stick into the PSP or if we have any plans to release such a stick. There are some who are wondering how to modify the PSP to display the game on a bigger screen. I think they



With the PSP flagging behind the DS in Japan, the team (l-r Harada, Hayashi and Matsumara) is well aware of the importance of titles like *T:DR*. Besides bringing in a new audience, it also pushes the handheld to its limit



Harada was adamant the game be a full *Tekken* title: "Had we called it *Tekken Portable*, it would be seen as a downsized *Tekken*. It could not express the high level of accomplishment"



have not realised what we are preparing. They don't look at this *Tekken* as a new experience.

Has switching from an arcade to a portable platform meant you've had to experiment with different game modes?

KH: We have designed many minigames that you can enjoy ad-hoc. These games are a lot of fun and you could enjoy *Tekken* with them alone. We are particularly proud of our bowling minigame. Elsewhere, our network feature is divided in two: ghosts that you can download from all over the world, and then you have the wireless ad-hoc versus mode. When you upload your ghost on a server, it will have learned all your fighting habits and combos.

The market for fighting games is not as strong as it used to be. Why do you think this is?

KH: Fighting games used to be a benchmark to measure the difference between game-makers in terms of skill and know-how. I think this lasted for at least five years during the golden age. The reason is, on screen you have only one character against another, so you could put as many polygons as you wanted on each character. Nowadays, the PC is offering more advanced graphics than the arcades. Games are also returning to very basic concepts, especially with online gaming. Concepts like the ones we used to enjoy with the Famicom or the Super Famicom. With fighting games you need to train every day to be among the best players. You need to invest time, and you may not have that much.

With *Tekken 6* being announced for the PlayStation 3 and no arcade version confirmed, are Namco following the same path Tecmo took when they made *Dead Or Alive* a consumer-only franchise?

KH: Not at all. I won't deny that such a trend is taking place with games leaving the arcade to focus on a consumer career. But should *Tekken* take a consumer-only direction, I think it would lose most of what makes it *Tekken* in the first place. I mean, in the arcade you are buying an intense game experience for ¥100. We have designed the game experience around this simple fact. It's a very severe world in which people have to find their enjoyment during a very short period. If we go consumer-only, then everything would become easy, and the core essence of the game would not be needed any more. The arcade remains the base of *Tekken*.

Are you concerned by the current market supremacy of the DS?

KH: The DS is very strong. DS titles like *Brain Training* are very addictive indeed. However, these are not videogames as we commonly know them.
NH: The key to the DS's success comes with the design of titles specific to it. I believe that, for the moment, there are no PSP games on the market really using the full power of the machine.
KH: When you see *T:DR* in motion, you could not think this is actually running on the PSP after all the games released so far. Even people not familiar with fighting games will stop and take a closer look at the game in motion, or even the movies. We really believe we have a benchmark for the PSP. Many in the development team don't own a PSP. But with what we have been able to deliver, I really feel the need to get one, just to enjoy our achievement.



Newswire



Pro-gaming spends big

Global Gaming League chairman Ted Owen's goal of putting athletes with 1s in their name on the podium of the 2008 Olympics might seem a tad ambitious, but those cynical of gaming's stature as a professional sport will be hard pressed to downplay its latest move. *Halo 2* team Final Boss were this month signed to the widely recognised Major League Gaming association with a $1 million contract, while solo player Tom 'Tsquared' Taylor received his own for $250,000. Terms include the players' agreement to feature exclusively in MLG competitions, while long-time supporter Red Bull has now agreed to officially sponsor those events.

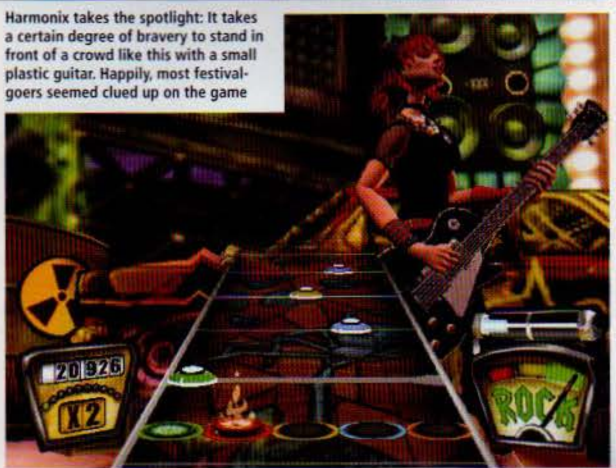


Among the challenges faced by the team was the screen size. On top of the issues of displaying arcade visuals on a handheld, they also needed to take into account a ratio change from 4:3 to 16:9





Harmonix takes the spotlight: It takes a certain degree of bravery to stand in front of a crowd like this with a small plastic guitar. Happily, most festival-goers seemed clued up on the game



EVENT

Stage invasion

Guitar Hero takes over Donington's Download Festival



Three thousand people gathered at Donington in June and saw the history of rock played out on a plastic guitar. Over the three-day event, seasoned *Guitar Hero* vets and even a few newcomers shared the Gibson Stage with acts like Metallica and Guns N' Roses – the kind of people whose agenda for television sets has traditionally ended with hotel room windows.

Festival-goers and *Guitar Hero* fans **Phil Davies** and **Manny Brown** took to the stage for a performance of the Red Hot Chili Peppers' Higher Ground that was reigned in only by their need to stay focused on a tiny monitor. "It was an honour to play Donington, considering all the bands that have played the venue over the years, and to do it on *Guitar Hero* made it all the sweeter," said Brown afterwards. Davies agreed: "As soon as it started going, people were flocking into the tent and it was just amazing. The pros were playing on hard and expert settings – it was impressive stuff."

If it sounds like the recipe for an impromptu bottling, the truth was more surprising. "I thought that the crowd were hugely knowledgeable about the game," said Brown. "People recognised difficult song selections and even when difficult solos or progressions were played, which made the experience as close as you can get to actually playing a gig to that many people."

But how close can that ever really be? While

"I know a lot of guitarists who've played Guitar Hero, and they have a great time doing it, but playing six strings isn't the same thing as mashing five buttons"



The *Guitar Hero* SG controller proved itself hardy enough to stand up to a full festival's-worth of rock abuse despite being made from plastic. From a distance, only its diminutive size and those five multi-coloured fret buttons gave its true use away

Guitar Hero's Gibson controller makes it particularly suited to live performance (it's harder to imagine Formula One fans standing around at Silverstone to watch virtuoso *Burnout*, for example) anyone who's picked up a real guitar after familiarising themselves with the plastic SG will know how disheartening the experience can be. But Davies suggests that maybe it cuts both ways: "I know a lot of guitarists who've played *Guitar Hero*, and they have a great time doing it, but because they play a lot of guitar doesn't mean they're going to be any good. Playing six strings isn't the same thing as mashing five buttons."

Guitar Hero developer Harmonix has already branded its titles 'superstar simulators,' and this aspect of gaming will come as no surprise to anyone who has gathered around a *Virtua Fighter* cabinet or spent hours playing *SingStar*. What was striking about the Download event, though, was the extent to which these activities are now being recognised as credible performances in their own right. *Guitar Hero* has brought music games out of the arcades and living rooms and into a more public arena; if titles like *Wipeout* and *Frequency* have long cultivated links with electronica, the mud and lo-fi sensibilities of the rock crowd represents a considerably longer reach.

The days when mobs might climb the fences to get into a festival exclusively devoted to videogame acts might be a very long way off, but Download and *Guitar Hero* still offered a rare glimpse of real and virtual experts sharing the limelight irrespective of medium, united by a single concept: performance.



This year's Download Festival saw performances from acts including Tool and Cradle of Filth alongside the *Guitar Hero* stars. People flocked to the Gibson tent throughout the three-day event

OUT THERE



GO DIRECTLY TO HYRULE

It's certainly not the first time Nintendo has partnered with the board game industry to bring curious crossovers and ill-contextualised licences to tabletops (we still recall punching out cardboard heart container coins), but it seems its latest venture with USAopoly to produce a classic franchise-themed version of Monopoly might be an opportunity lost.



Rather than relying on relevant properties – LonLon Ranch, Nookington's and a green-pipe-themed waterworks spring quickly to mind – early prototype shots instead show spaces dedicated to the characters themselves, bringing up uncomfortable questions about what that $300 for Princess Zelda is going toward, exactly. In any case, bagsy Samus' Boots.



INTERVIEW

Murder at sea

Independent developer Outerlight on making floating killing spree The Ship

Outerlight, developers of *Half-Life* mod turned stand-alone, Source-based release *The Ship* (see page 36) are justifiably proud of their creation. It is a firstperson, multiplayer, comedy murder simulator, set on-board a turn of the 20th century cruise liner. Simultaneously off-beat, hilarious and violent, it will be released via Steam this month. As **Chris Peck**, managing director and creative director of Outerlight explains, building the game hasn't been plain sailing.

You built the original mod as a way to source feedback – how successful was it? Did the gaming community welcome its differences, or were there calls to 'normalise' it?

We built the mod for two reasons, for internal proof of concept, and as a proof of concept for publishers. From an internal point of view it was very useful, but for presenting to publishers it was all but useless: they couldn't see past the graphics of *Half-Life1*. I seem to recollect that at the time we were concerned whether we would have enough money to keep the company going, so there was an element of "if we don't make it, at least people will have been able to play the game" so we would have achieved something.

Without naming names, what have been some of the more interesting publisher responses to *The Ship* while you were shopping it around?

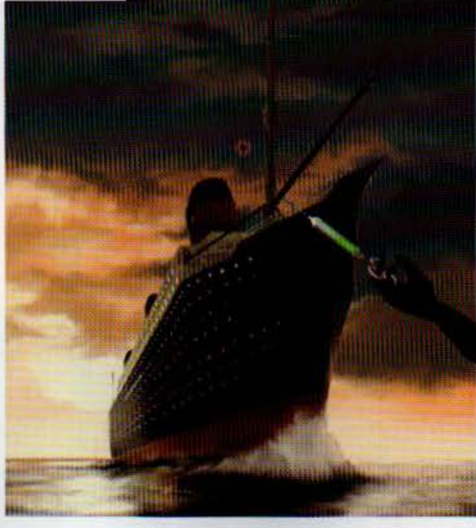
[Laughs] Oh dear. Well, 90 per cent of the publishers we met said it was one of their favourite pitches or game ideas, yet none seemed keen to put their money where their mouths were. Some said it was too expensive, some said it was too cheap. Some said it was too original, others said it was unproved. One said of the *Half-Life* mod: "Is this your vision of how it will look?" We felt we wasted a lot of time courting publishers, which is another reason we went self-funded.

> **"Some said it was too expensive, some said it was too cheap. Some said it was too original, others said it was unproved. One said of the Half-Life mod: 'Is this how it will look?'"**

There's a sentiment that the current next-generation, super-budget boom is the worst time to be a small independent, that the process of moving from mod team to devco simply isn't viable any more – as someone who's on the cusp of doing just that, what are your thoughts?

That could be true. As we have been around as a company for three years, we have been watching with horror as developer after developer bit the dust. Our only positive thought was that in an ever-growing pond, fewer fish could only mean more room for us.

One day there will be so few developers that the publishers will be demanding content, and hopefully we will be there when it's a seller's market! Having come up with the idea, raised the finance, funded development and then developed the title, I am somewhat aggrieved to have to give a large chunk of royalties to a second party.





The art style avoids a straight realism in favour of a more angular approach. It suits the mood perfectly – shifting attention from the grisly deaths and sidestepping any real moral objections. This is a cartoon game; closer to Tom and Jerry than La Femme Nikita

While you've initially developed *The Ship* as a PC title, are you interested in the opportunities suggested by Microsoft and Sony's online plans?

Definitely yes. I think that people will want The Ship when they are in the mood for something different, something a little less twitchy, and a bit more stealthy. We hope to port the game to Xbox 360 as this will be technically achievable. I don't think we can make the game run on the PS3, not without a total rewrite anyway!

Were you concerned by the fact that while *The Ship* existed as an unsigned, free mod its concepts could be appropriated and used by other developers?

We were slightly concerned that other people would steal parts of the idea, however, it's so unique, it's hard to steal parts of it. Imagine *Call Of Duty* with needs... it's not going work is it? By putting it in the public domain we were both staking our claim to the intellectual copyright, and showing that we had got there first. I think if the game relied on a couple of unique features, such as a deployable weapon, or physics cannon, something like that, then maybe we would have been a lot more cautious. Gamers are a pretty sophisticated bunch now, certainly far removed from the old image of geeks in bedrooms. I know there is still a lot of that, but a lot of those geeks are now middle aged... and while still passionate gamers, they want what's next. Hopefully *The Ship* is part of what's next.

OUT THERE



GENERATIONS AIR

In yet another strategic move to push the DS and its Touch Generations line-up further into the executive mindset, Japanese airline JAL has announced a partnership with Nintendo to bring free on-request DS Lites to passengers aboard its intercontinental flights.

The flights will be stocked with copies of Brain and English Training, Touch Golf and Mario Kart, the latter unfortunately hampered by laws forbidding wifi use in air travel. The move's a smart one on Nintendo's part to further legitimise its handheld as a viable entertainment option for adults, though there's likely few current gamers who would dare board a long flight without a handheld at their side. But sorry, economy customers, this offer's first-class only.



● http://www.jal.co.jp/en/nds/

EVENT







Will Fight Night Round 3, Guitar Hero or Project Gotham Racing 3 walk away with an award? The answer is in the hands of the public

Golden Joystick Awards return

TV broadcast debut and an MTV hostess help raise the profile of 2006's event



MTV presenter and ex-model Emma Griffiths is to host the awards, a role formerly filled by Jonathan Ross and Jimmy Carr

Annual updates may not often be cause for celebration, but that's precisely the idea behind the Golden Joystick Awards. Running since 1982, this year's ceremony is taking place on Friday October 27 in the Park Lane Hilton, London. The GJA will be receiving its broadcast debut, too – the event is to be screened on ITV4 on November 24 as part of an evening of game-themed programming, and a live stream will be available via www.computerandvideogames.com

What the Golden Joystick Awards offers first and foremost, however, is the chance for the public to choose the winners of each of the 17 gongs up for grabs. This year's online booths are already open for business at www.goldenjoystick.co.uk, and have been running since June 1. The categories include Ultimate Game of the Year, Soundtrack Award, One to Watch for 2007, Online Game of the Year, Favourite Character Award and individual best-of-format awards for consoles (with the GameCube covered by Nintendo Game of the Year) and PC.

Nominees for each category aren't restricted to a select handful of finalists, but all games released between August 1 2005 and July 31 2006 are admitted, and an email address is provided on the voting slip to submit any titles that you feel have been overlooked. At the time of writing, Xbox Live Arcade titles aren't represented at all and *GTA: San Andreas* has snuck in once again under the guise of a 'special edition' re-release – so let the organisers know if you think that's unfair. In any case, be sure to have your say.

Continue

Hitman slapstick
The only good bug is a very funny bug

Dashboard updates
They shouldn't be exciting, but yet they are

Elite IV
Is technology finally catching up with design?

Quit

Live Arcade
Still stuck in the doldrums, and needing new games

Rechargers
How many more will we need to find sockets for?

Nintendo stars
Why must the west's reward catalogue miss out?



Author: Dean Takahashi
Publisher: SpiderWorks
ISBN: 0 977 78421 5

THE XBOX 360 UNCLOAKED

The inside track to the creation of Xbox 360 isn't as exciting as the creative chaos which generated its predecessor

Making his name with 2002's excellent Opening The Xbox, Dean Takahashi returns to pump his contacts for the sequel. But sadly for the San Jose Mercury News journalist, lightning doesn't strike twice. It's not really his fault of course. The first book was a genuine surprise, both in terms of details revealed as well as access to personalities such as Seamus Blackley who, with three co-conspirators, plotted a gaming revolution. The Xbox's success has inevitably undermined that renegade spirit, and the result is that the story of its successor is more conservatively corporate and less entertainingly iconoclastic. Still, Takahashi does his best with the material at hand, with differences of opinion between Fries and Allard one of the more interesting angles. Heading up Microsoft's game studios until his departure in 2004, Fries found himself under pressure following the $375 million (£202 million) Rare purchase. The situation came to a head over *Halo 2*, with Fries' 'it's done, when it's done' attitude unpopular, particular with Bach, who argued the needs of the platform outweighed the needs of the franchise. Fries won that battle, but lost the war. Story apart, The Xbox 360 Uncloaked isn't helped by the lack of a good editor either. It feels rushed and about 100 pages too long, with chapters spent detailing the minutiae of design and tedious marketing decisions. Still, industry insiders will find it interesting – just not engrossing.



Author: Douglas Coupland
Publisher: Bloomsbury
ISBN: 1 59691 104 2

JPOD

The author of Generation X slips into self-referential smugness as he tries to make sense of the lives and loves of game developers

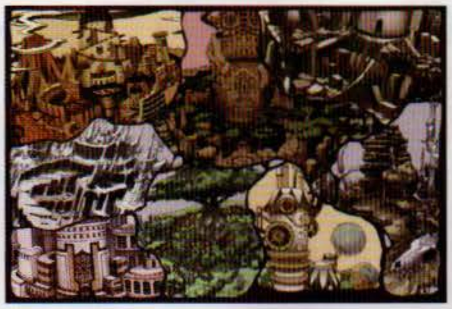
You feel as if you should have some respect for Coupland's tenth novel, which starts with the line: "Oh God. I feel like a refugee from a Douglas Coupland novel," but it's hard to muster the effort. The loose sequel to Microserfs, his 1995 book about the slipping-down lives of Silicon Valley software workers, JPod is nothing if not self-referential. Not only does Coupland himself become a key character, but it's shot through with his characteristic op-art fixation. Examples include lists such as the 972 three-letter words allowed in Scrabble, and the first 100,000 digits of Pi. These are given some context by the strange world of the six geeky inhabitants of JPod, a group of developers working on an extreme skating game into which management introduces a turtle. The company seems to be based loosely on EA. It's based in Coupland's and EA's home town of Vancouver, for example, so you'd assume he's had contact with disgruntled employees. He doesn't really provide any killer insights into the psyche – instead, protagonist Ethan and his workmates quickly become a tedious sketch, where non sequiturs such as Chinese people smugglers, suburban skunk production and easy real-estate deals fail to combine in anything like a satisfactory manner. But perhaps the most telling sign Coupland's heart isn't really in it is when his character makes a deal to get Ethan's laptop because his new book is due, and it's easier to steal Ethan's life story than actually create something. It's just too smug by half.

Halo 3
FORMAT: 360 **PUBLISHER:** MICROSOFT



Microsoft's downloadable exposés of its E3 presentations were a novel idea until the self-congratulatory tone made them an utter chore to watch. *Halo*'s provided some eye candy, but few insights

Chaos Wars
FORMAT: PS2 **PUBLISHER:** IDEA FACTORY



Idea Factory's SRPG extends its draft to include characters from Sega, Atlus and Aruze. But a contentious art style, and the prior example of *Namco X Capcom*, might ground it in its native land

Half-Life 2: Episode Two
FORMAT: PC **PUBLISHER:** VALVE



Awarded for completion of *Episode One*, a preview of Valve's next aftermath. As fans of the series will now be aware, the scene for part two is substantially removed from its predecessor

Phantasy Star Universe
FORMAT: 360, PC, PS2 **PUBLISHER:** SEGA



The inflated textures and sharp edges of the PC version should produce tolerable results on 360, but a glance at the flat-packed trees and marbled rocks is a quick reminder of PS2 foundations

The Red Star
FORMAT: PS2 **PUBLISHER:** XS GAMES



One of several orphans rescued from the fires of Acclaim, the shoot 'em up offspring of Studio Austin and comic book creator Archangel finally steps out of the shadows, if not out of beta

Mercenaries 2: World In Flames
FORMAT: PS3 **PUBLISHER:** TBA



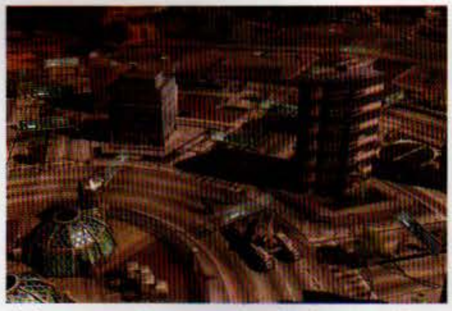
Its badge of distinction is uninhibited excess, but Pandemic would do well to stall *WIF*'s previews. Early in-game videos uphold the claims of wanton destruction, but suggest rickety architecture

Shadowrun
FORMAT: 360 **PUBLISHER:** MICROSOFT



With even Microsoft staff going public with the hate, you'd have thought FASA's controversial FPS would have retreated into its own dark corner. But it has held its ground and silenced critics

Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars
FORMAT: PC **PUBLISHER:** EA



The latest screens raise more questions than they answer, like how AI pathfinding will hold up amid heavily-furnished terrain, and how much destructibility is suggested rather than modelled

Hotel Dusk: Room 215
FORMAT: DS **PUBLISHER:** NINTENDO



Once entitled *Wish Room*, Cing's follow-up to the inventive and engrossing *Another Code* sketches an entirely new premise in an encouraging style, purposefully confusing graphics and graphite



INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH
Gibbage

http://www.gibbage.co.uk/

Dan Marshall's debut is wrapped in an estimable ethos of not trying to accomplish something new so much as trying to build on an established groundwork and do it better. It's as simple (or classic) as decades' worth of games before it: run, jump and kill your opponent in a compact single-screen arena.

But where many have started and stopped there before, the titular gibbage itself is but one half of the game's rewarding push and pull dynamic necessary for your success. Instead, players are also in an unrelenting scramble for randomly-spawned power cubes which, when delivered to their respective home base, extend the non-stop countdown to the players' round-ending death.

Best played with two live humans (a bold idea in today's Live era, but trust us), *Gibbage* is a winning formula of strong design, humour and glorious cartoon ultraviolence, with each arena ending up caked in blood and the players' disembodied heads, and is a much-needed example for the independent community on how to transform influence into ingenuity.



Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater (below), *Dead Or Alive 4* (bottom) and *Resident Evil 4* (right) are among the games given the new D rating







SOMETHING ABOUT Japan

An adults only revolution

Famitsu PS2's Koji Aizawa on Japan's new games rating system



Forgive me if I start with a somewhat long explanation, but something important is happening this month: the Japanese videogame rating system will be undergoing a major re-structuring.

In Japan, the age ratings of games are arranged by CESA, which stands for Computer Entertainment Supplier's Association. It organises things like the Tokyo Game Show, but is also at the heart of the Japanese videogame industry – for consoles, at least. It is also at the heart of the CERO rating system, which stands for Computer Entertainment Rating Organization. Yes, this is the Japanese official rating system. Until now, it was based on classes of age.

This is going to be entirely reshaped into a new system. The old '18 years old or more' rating is now divided into two: '17 years old or over' and '18 years old or more'. But what we used to know as 'age classes' are now renamed using letters of the alphabet: A for all ages, B for 12 years old or more, C for 15 years old or more, D for 17 years old or more and Z for 18 years old or more.

The problem comes from the last class: Z. It designates games which have adult-oriented contents. These games will have difficulty finding a place where they can be displayed in game shops from now on. Only two locations are allowed under the new CERO guidance. These games can be placed in a Z-rated dedicated corner or behind the counter. In addition, shops need to display a clear sign warning users about the presence of Z-rated games on the shelf – and it has to be quite a size: the sign has to be clearly visible from at least 1.5 metres away. But even if you can find the games, you might not be able to buy them. In some prefectures, ID has to be shown when a person wants to buy a Z-rated game. This is not part of the CERO guidelines, but depends on the laws put in place by every prefecture in Japan.

So the direct consequence is two separate worlds. The A-to-D-rated games will go mainstream and the Z-rated ones will be cornered into special areas. These two categories will require different locations and retail practices. Already, stores are taking decisions about how to respond to these conditions. For instance, the major convenience stores in Japan have already made it clear they will not sell any Z-rated games.

It is more important than ever to take the overseas market into the equation. Developers need to make games which will sell outside Japan. Mostly, this means they feature a high level of realism, often associated with violence

OK, but what is exactly a Z-rated game? For the moment it is unclear, even though 11 titles have







The Getaway: Black Monday **(top right),** ***GTA: San Andreas*** **(bottom right) and** ***Max Payne 2: The Fall Of Max Payne*** **are among the games whose more dubious morality has earned them a Z rating**





been announced as Z-rated. Among them you find familiar series – many of them western – like *GTA* or *The Getaway* and *Driver 3*, *Max Payne*, *Killer 7*, etc... can you see a difference between these games and the ones you can buy with a D-rating, like *Biohazard 4*, *MGS3*, *Dead Or Alive 4*, *Rumble Roses*, *God Of War*, *SOCOM* and *Splinter Cell*?

When a game company wants to release a game, it's seen as bad news if its title receives a Z rating since it won't be so easy to sell it in Japan. But there is another side to the problem: it is more important than ever to take the overseas market (US and Europe) into the equation. Developers need to make games which will sell outside Japan. Mostly, this means they have to feature a high level of realism, often associated with a certain level of violence. But these kinds of games are exactly the ones which will attract a Z rating inside Japan! Of course, the new system is designed to protect young people – and personally I think this is the right thing to do. But excessive limitations will have a negative impact as well, because it restricts developers' creativity as well as the ways in which the media can support a game. I think a more flexible approach should be found.

By the way, *GTA: San Andreas* is not even released in Japan yet. It will be interesting to see what happens when it is.

The Z class is described as being for 18 years old or more, but in practice it does not seem to be being used that way. It is not about restricting access to adult-oriented games. In Japan, there is a lot of adult-oriented content from movies to anime and manga. And, since CERO only applies to videogames on consoles, this rating does not protect young gamers from games on other platforms. So this new CERO is not about adult content in the global sense of the term. I think more explanations are required to define what this Z rating stands really for to ensure that game companies can keep making creative games for a global audience.

Hype

The future of electronic entertainment

Edge's most wanted

Super Mario Galaxy



Still the memory that burns brightest from E3, it's impossible not to crave the moment when Mario's galaxy (and the Wii's implications) will be ours to explore
Wii, NINTENDO

Need For Speed Carbon



Had the cops not taken occasional doughnut breaks when they should have been on your tail, the 360's *Most Wanted* would have excelled. Fingers crossed for tenth time lucky
TBA, EA

Trauma Center: Second Opinion



The DS original hardly sold the experience of being a doctoring hero short, but the possibility of doing it all again – big screen, and with an audience – is irresistible
Wii, NINTENDO

As canny as she looks

An unexpected expedition leader



For all the moments in The Casting that trigger a sense of uncanny valley (of which many are provoked by her weirdly inorganic teeth), there's no doubting the emotional connection that many viewers felt to Mary Smith's story

Mary Smith, the virtual star of Quantic Dream's tech demo The Casting (see page 50) has a slightly wonky mouth, an unexpected fullness in her top lip that fuels the faint, uncomfortable awareness that she's a manufactured human, not a real one. But watch footage of the actress that inspired her, Aurelie Bancilhon, and you'll discover that it's not a failure on the part of the modellers, it's an idiosyncrasy of the beautiful face that inspired them. The uncanny valley – the dip where our response to human replicas becomes negative as they edge closer to perfection – can be very treacherous territory.

Not least because there are two things that get forgotten about the theory (three, if you include the fact that the scientific rigour of the research behind it is still very much in question, even if the common-sensical obviousness of its findings isn't). The first is that there's nothing in the theory that says we can't cross it. Nothing to say that with enough technology, effort and talent we can't fill in the valley, and march across the top to truly believable unreality.

But games may be worst placed to make that attempt, because the other forgotten thing is that movement dramatically amplifies the effect: an animated robot will unsettle a human audience much more dramatically than one that's still. And watching Mary Smith makes you very aware that there might be another curve that needs tracing on Professor Mori's famous chart – one that dips even more alarmingly: what about robots under your control? We may have very high expectations for replicas of other human beings, but we also have a built-in tolerance for their foibles, unpredictabilities and flaws. But each of us – every single one of us – already has the most sophisticated humanoid robot ever built under our command, 24 hours a day. We know it can turn on a pin, turn shaky tears to barbed jokes in the time it takes to say a word or, if no-one's about, combine chopping carrots with dancing to the radio.

Quantic Dream – alongside many other animators and roboticists – may be hammering in the first bolts for the ascent up the other side of the valley, but for games that might prove a false summit. Another peak may lurk behind that asks even more of developers than the first.

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **CLOVER**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **AUTUMN (JAPAN), TBA (UK)**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E164**

God Hand

Clover's Devil May Care makes an irresistible debut: an action game that wants to laugh with you, not at you



In true Capcom 2D beat 'em up style, *God Hand*'s chunky character models dominate the screen, with the extra dimension used to contort them as hits connect in Mikami's signature endless juggles







Aside from the matter of charging up the God Hand's powers, landed hits fill up a fraction of the level meter surrounding its luminous, gurning skull. Each blow Jean takes will drastically drain it even on the Normal difficulty setting, however, indicating that skilled play will require avoiding such slip-ups

Through accidental delay or late-blooming design, the Japanese PS2 release schedule has ensured the machine's journey out of the generational spotlight is a chauffeur-driven one. Even if *God Hand*'s visuals punch below the weight of *Yakuza*, *FFXII* and *Okami* – its style may be impetuous, its defence impregnable, but its environments are boxy – it could well swagger up to a place among them as one of the machine's latter-day stars. So self-mockingly straightforward that its existence could have been an E3 mass hallucination, it's a beat 'em up that starts fights with a grin and leaves them with a smile.

Then again, maybe it's not so straightforward: recent action games have kept their comedy unintentional and their difficulty unfazed by an ice-breaking shared joke. Few who stepped up to *God Hand* at E3, from attendees to Capcom reps, didn't come away laughing – to the visible relief of Clover head Atsushi Inaba, making nervous circuits of his games' stands. And while we won't claim that Shinji Mikami has gone soft – *God Hand*'s own trailer sells itself as 'ball-bustingly hard… but fair,' though the current demo refuses access to that Hard difficulty – he's certainly lightened up a little. *God Hand* looks for the ridiculous in the action genre and embraces it, finding physical comedy in full-contact and sight gags in power-ups.

So self-mockingly straightforward that its existence could have been an E3 mass hallucination, it's a beat 'em up that starts fights with a grin and leaves them with a smile





Jean's snow-haired, red-scarved concept was perhaps a little too similar to another Mikami hero, and his in-game model has been reworked to a browner scheme. He does share Dante's cockiness, though, and seemingly his voice actor





It's also aware that if you need to explain the joke it wasn't funny enough in the first place, keeping combat complexity to two attack buttons, a context-sensitive response (the context usually being protagonist Jean's foot in an enemy's sensitive area), and evasion on the right analogue. Combos are player-arranged, each attack button cycling through four available slots which can be filled with devastating jabs and roundhouses, or equally devastating Pimp Slaps and Fists Of Justice. From punch-up to slap-down in a flurry of limbs, combat is hardly leisurely to begin with – but unleashing the God Hand itself puts the soundtrack, and Jean's fighting tempo, into double-time, tipping the odds even more wildly in his favour.

And yet that's not the ace up his metal-plated sleeve: the game's most outrageous features all line up in the Roulette Techniques, triggered by a shoulder-button press. Each result is a seemingly game-breakingly overpowered attack that at the very least obliterates its target, from a kick between the legs to a punt over the horizon. Often clearing the screen of neighbouring enemies, shopfronts, furniture and windowpanes, they're as much whoopee cushion as smart bomb, an endless stream of punchlines to 'a guy walks into a saloon' jokes. Currently, however, this demo plays with a fixed wheel – allowing you to choose your desired method of dispatch – whereas presumably the finished game's spin will prevent them going stale too fast, and add an element of risk: a Failure result unceremoniously dumps an iron washtub on Jean's head, staggering him.

The lengthy move list that the demo offers from the outset is also likely to be rationed out in the full version, this being more *God Hand: Party Edition* – which feels slightly disappointing considering how well the game works when it lets you have your pie and throw it too. But comedy, much like mechanically-exacting action games, is all about timing – and if *God Hand* is to maintain its cartoonish excess over an entire game then it needs to observe the rules as well as lampoon them. Clover is a capable developer for the task, and its game a study in double-takes: irreverently dumb chiefly by virtue of being wickedly clever, ludicrously violent yet never spilling a drop of blood.

God Hand feels like a game built for its platform and its time, with a sense that it's a farewell to arms, fists, knuckles and feet – that next-generation costs will mean games literally can't afford to not take themselves seriously, and there's no place on the shelves for the ultimate strangeness of the arcade. That may not turn out to be the case, nor may *God Hand* be a particularly successful send-off – but at least Clover can say the beat 'em up went out with a bang.

Five a day

God Hand takes a step back from green orbs, health potions and medikits to a simpler arcade age: Jean recovers health by picking up incongruous, oversized portions of fruit (his repeated "I love it!" soundbite ages far more gracefully than might be expected). Roulette Technique and God Hand levels are charged by picking up cards – usually a stylized death's-head, but occasionally mixing it up with a tastefully censored girlie pin-up.







Comedy sound effects (including audience reaction) and animation that speeds up to match your button-presses allow the violence to straddle impact and lightheartedness

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **WINTER**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E164**



Sonic's sections are fast and vertiginous, and do as good a job of recreating his classic charms as any 3D effort yet. Sadly, the controls aren't yet equal to the task

Sonic The Hedgehog

Sonic gets to stretch his legs in a major home console title once more, but jostling co-stars still threaten to run him off course

It was originally supposed to be back-to-basics; at least the title still is. Fifteen years since the first game bore the same name, Sega has given the brand reset button a much-needed push, banishing qualifications and co-stars from marquee status and offering its blue mascot a headlining fresh start on a new generation of hardware. However, somewhere along the line, it lost all the courage of its on-paper convictions.

Perhaps it was just that the clamour for a return to the simple, dazzling sprints of Sonic's youth, loud as it has been, got drowned out by the astonishing sales success of hotchpotch ensemble piece *Sonic Heroes*. Perhaps it was fear that Sonic Team never would be able make Sonic work as he should in 3D; or that despite the remarkable staying power of his battered brand, the hedgehog didn't have the clout to carry a game on his own these days; or that his traditionally adolescent audience now craved more variety, destruction and thematic edginess than simply running fast and jumping could provide. Whatever the reason, Sonic's first solo appearance in years will now be in the Wii rollercoaster ride *Sonic Wildfire*, while this major relaunch forces him to share the limelight and split the gameplay styles with anti-hero Shadow and a new character, telekinetic hedgehog-from-the-future Silver.

Crucially, it's blindingly fast and essentially linear, although exploration and experimentation will uncover some alternative routes and shortcuts

On the basis of current code, however, the cause of the *Sonic* purist is not entirely lost. It may kick up a fair few concerns, but Sonic's half of this demo (the other being Silver's, with Shadow yet to be shown) is still the most convincing stab at recreating the *Sonic* rush in full 3D to date, perhaps excluding the first glimpses of *Wildfire*. Crucially, it's blindingly fast and essentially linear, although exploration and experimentation will uncover some alternative routes and shortcuts. The first half of the level allows free movement, but a guiding hand is never far away, be it in the shape of a grind rail, an air chute or even those familiar trails of coins. (A tap of the X button – also used for a sliding, spinning attack – sucks Sonic along a coin path in a blip of surreal speed; an exhilarating and useful touch, especially handy in midair.) These steers are a very necessary counterbalance, though, to controls that are firmly on the wrong side of precarious. Direction-change sensitivity at speed is far too high, while the camera somehow manages to be both sluggish and wildly unpredictable, resulting in many unnecessary falls. Combat, featuring the now-familiar and still-satisfying homing jump attack as well as the all-too-slippery slide, also needs a much more stable camera to prevent haywire moments of madness.

Even discounting frustrating deaths by blips and glitches – which can, hopefully, be ironed out – it's a surprisingly tough level, and sometimes hard to read. These are largely unavoidable side-effects of the speed of play and old-school spirit, and do mean that, unlike most modern platformers, these sections of *Sonic The Hedgehog* should be more enjoyable the better you know them, encouraging repeated score-attack play. A second Sonic stage has the hedgehog running automatically – once again at a terrific lick – along the floor and walls of a dreamlike, mist-shrouded tunnel of water. With much more smoothly modulated controls and focused design, it's a relative





Wall-running is a rather obvious extension of Sonic's natural speed, and it looks likely to form a central part of the on-rails, tunnel-style levels as well as providing tougher, bigger-scoring shortcuts in free-roaming play. The thinking behind when and where it is and isn't possible seems a little fuzzy in the demo levels, however





Likely to be a PS3 launch title, *Sonic* is not a particularly striking showcase for new hardware; beyond the display resolution, there's not much to distinguish it from the best-looking Xbox games. It's a fair trade for the stunning speed it's capable of, though

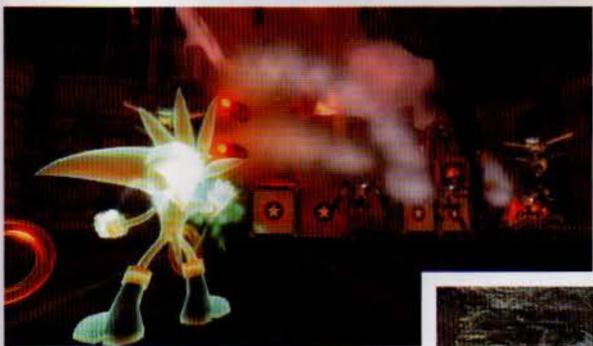






Those touches most reminiscent of Sonic's roots – like these robotic crabs, or the retro references in the sound effects – are the most confident and distinctive by far, but they risk being lost in a game headed towards terminal stylistic confusion





The hedgehogs' appearance has now reached a stylistic extreme beyond anthropomorphism and into the just plain weird. It's in stark contrast to an increasingly conventional approach to environment and enemy design



Ten areas are promised, with each of the three characters making their way through them in their own style; with level design matched closely to character, it's likely their paths will be separate. It will be possible to complete the game playing as Sonic alone, but only superficially so



breeze, but some scripted wall-jumping sections don't convince, and it's questionable whether these atmospheric and thrilling interludes will have the same replay value.

There's compromised promise here, a sense that Sega is at last prepared to play to its most famous character's strengths once more, even if it's going to ask difficult questions about their suitability for a modern action game in the process. There's certainly much more to say for it than the Silver level included in the demo. This is a bland, characterless and distinctly unpolished trek through the rubble of an identikit ruined city; beyond the trademark rings and some appealing mechanised crabs, there's nothing to say you're playing a *Sonic* game, and little to suggest you're playing it on powerful new hardware. Silver progresses by hurling debris and crates at enemies with his psychic powers – or throwing their own missiles back at them – as well as using his telekinesis at entirely scripted, predetermined and bluntly marked points to raise platforms or turning girders into springs. The control scheme is simple and logical (hold R to raise objects, press X to throw them), but as it stands, without any target indication or selection and precious little sensory feedback, and limited opportunities for creativity built into the level design, it feels vague and holds little interest. The physics are merely adequate, and the whole doesn't seem like an advance on – in fact, feels more like a retreat from – the last-gen likes of *Psi-Ops* and *Second Sight*.

Shadow's portions of the game might yet prove to be more assured than Silver's, but with Sonic's sinister twin appearing to spend most of his time behind the wheel of a heavily-armoured jeep, they aren't likely to be any more in keeping with the series' original style. The confirmed presence of a town area, where Sonic will interact with NPCs in pseudo-RPG fashion, seems to indicate further dilution of this initially valiant attempt to get the franchise back on a purpose-built, high-speed track. It may be time for the faithful to finally surrender ownership of Sonic to a generation who have grown up with him as a brash, sociable cartoon star, not a solo 16bit icon. But not, we suspect, before they've given him one last wild, unpredictable spin.

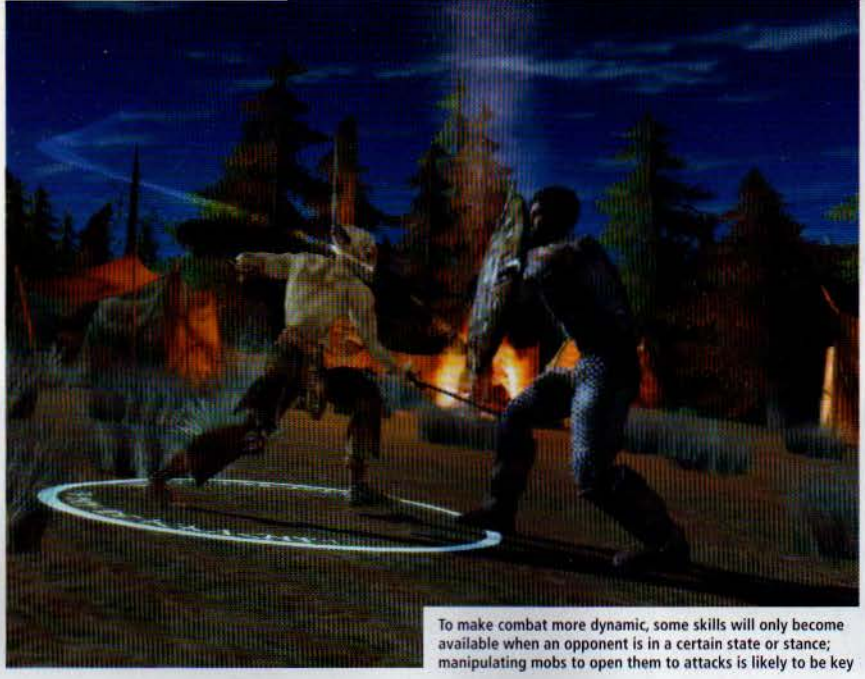


Chrono trigger

Details are muddy, but current suggestions are of a plot that's alarmingly overdeveloped in both style and content. A princess straight out of a *Final Fantasy* cutscene has been captured by Robotnik – himself an uneasy melange of cartoon and realism. Meanwhile, after some future cataclysm, Silver is tracking down its source, a MacGuffin known as the 'Iblis trigger', which he may even believe is Sonic himself. Such a narrative seems out of place in Sonic's world, but even that doesn't clash as awkwardly as the stark contradictions in character design do.

Steefel denies any direct influence from the films on the game's look: "If you take really good artists and you give them source material which is so explicit about the way things look, you're going to end up with things that look pretty much the same"





To make combat more dynamic, some skills will only become available when an opponent is in a certain state or stance; manipulating mobs to open them to attacks is likely to be key



LOTR Online's Eriador is lush and verdant, with stunning effects and detailed, if slightly characterless models. Much will depend on its engine, though: a large part of *WOW*'s success came from a low-tech entry requirement



Lord Of The Rings Online: Shadows Of Angmar

Turbine's traditionalist Middle-earth MMO trades on the reassuringly familiar to mount the first serious bid for World Of WarCraft's crown

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **CODEMASTERS ONLINE GAMING**
DEVELOPER: **TURBINE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **WINTER 2006**

High-profile licensing is no guarantee of widespread success for MMOs, as *Star Wars Galaxies* proved. Being faithful to the source can restrict the evolutionary freedom a virtual world needs; on the other hand, a fully-developed franchise can provide a well of detail that's invaluable in slaking these games' ceaseless thirst for content. In this respect, *LOTRO* producer **Jeffrey Steefel** is confident he's sitting on a goldmine. "I could spend all the money in the world to find the best writers, the best designers, the best artists, and they could never devise a world as rich and deep and consistent as Tolkien did."

Having the luxury of dealing direct with the "incredibly flexible" Tolkien estate since Vivendi surrendered the licence, Turbine is well-placed to find solutions to thorny contextual problems such as magic use, death and player versus player combat (see 'Conflicting interests'). It has even been allowed to anachronistically resurrect the Witch King's realm of Angmar at the time of the War of the Ring to present a parallel threat to that faced by the Fellowship. The initial release will be consistent with the first book in time and place, the world later expanding to include the likes of the Rohanim (and with them, mounted combat). It will be one contiguous space, with stable networks providing instantaneous transport; 45 levels of adventuring will culminate in a strong endgame.

Aware that the licence is likely to provide a draw to many new and casual players, Turbine is playing it safe. "We want people who are playing popular MMOs today to feel comfortable," says Steefel, but it's a disingenuous plural, because of course *LOTRO*'s design bears a strong resemblance to *World Of WarCraft*'s refined conservatism. There are, however, encouraging signs that Turbine's pursuit of accessibility extends into a few small innovations.

'Persistent instancing' means that key, showstopping group encounters won't be repeatable by any individual, granting players the sense of personal influence and narrative coherence they're used to from offline adventuring. Then there are Traits, a system of achievement medals that grant more than bragging rights, feeding back into your character with skill and crafting modifiers. It's a smart application of familiar mainstream design to the particular demands of MMOs (in this case, the need to individualise); the same is true of the intriguing, but not yet demonstrated Conjunctions. These are effectively quick-fire, button-hitting QTE combos that occur within group play, and that could bring immediacy to the occasionally obscure world of MMO group dynamics (helped by voice chat support as standard).

These may be little more than embellishments on a proven template, but in a market that has been slow to capitalise on WOW's success – following it with a slew of strange imports and niche experiments – LOTRO's matured, formulaic approach is almost as strong an asset as that licence. Combined, they could quite plausibly make it the next – the second – truly massmarket western MMO.



The seven classes are available to all races: Hunter, Burglar, Champion (a meleé warrior) Guardian (the 'tank'), Loremaster and Minstrel (magical damage dealers and healers) and the Captain, whose banners give positive buffs



Conflicting interests

Although Turbine confirmed at E3 that *LOTRO* would allow player versus player combat, it hasn't yet revealed how it will massage it into the lore, considering the four player races it has announced – dwarf, elf, hobbit and man – are allied. Both Turbine and the Tolkein estate are reluctant to make antagonist races such as the orcs playable, feeling they lack intellect and individuality. On this issue, Turbine's answer will need to be more sophisticated than what Steefel calls the 'semantic' solutions it has come up with for death (re-termed 'defeat,' and health 'morale,' with the benefit of being refilled in unusual ways) and magic. "There are five wizards in Middle-earth ever," notes Steefel. "You cannot be a wizard. We just need to redefine why the magic occurs."







Despite the shift towards friendlier visuals, the mazes have lost none of their intricacy. As most players choose the top-down view, all level objects have been redesigned to make them identifiable from above



Colour puzzles play a large part in *Meltdown* – but this time Awesome has included a mixing chart in the top right-hand corner

Mercury Meltdown

Poisonous metals turn friendly as Mercury rolls back into view, determined to make a name for itself this time round

FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **IGNITION ENTERTAINMENT**
DEVELOPER: **AWESOME STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **SEPTEMBER**

Two points are immediately apparent upon playing the sequel to *Archer Maclean's Mercury*. The first is that the anachronistic Amiga-styled visuals are gone, replaced with a sharp cartoon design. The second is that it's not Archer Maclean's *Mercury* any more.

Of these two changes, the latter is the most controversial. "The first we knew about Archer quitting was when we turned up to work and were told he'd resigned," claims **Ed Bradley**, Awesome's studio manager. "I don't have the first idea what happened." As to the extent of Maclean's involvement with the sequel? "Trace elements at best."

Cause for concern? Perhaps the answer lies with the first change. Rather than a superficial aesthetic choice, the move towards something approaching cel-shading is emblematic of the team's desire to retain the basics of the original *Mercury*, but presented in a more accessible manner.

It's a trend that permeates deep into the game. *Meltdown* has eight worlds (now known as labs), each with 17 levels. While these levels range in difficulty, they are now playable in any order. Progression to the next lab is achieved by 'saving' 50 per cent of the available mercury, but a more flexible approach means that you can collect it any way you wish – 100 per cent from half of the levels, for example, will do the trick if the others prove too daunting. As a means of allowing a kinder progression while still providing something for the hardcore gamer, it's an elegant solution.

Changes elsewhere are similarly skewed to ironing out the original game's difficulty spikes. A 'free look' mode allows players to pause proceedings and scan the entire maze; equally, even if the time limit runs out, you can still complete the level, save the mercury and collect bonuses – you just won't be able to beat the high score challenges.

As for the levels themselves, those shown are a mix of the familiar and the pleasingly original. The game is still as much a test of tactics as it is of careful platforming. There are new level objects, different floor types and 'state changes', which can see the mercury heating up and becoming harder to control, or freezing into a ball bearing. Five party games are now available, offering a variety of challenges from simple races to an intricate block puzzler. Players will also be able to download entirely new labs via wifi (pricing and delivery method are still being discussed). Technical issues, such as loading times, have been addressed, but the fabled USB tilt sensor will not be making a late appearance. Even though there's a fully-functioning prototype "in a box somewhere" in Awesome's suitably maze-like building, the difficulties inherent with packaging and selling a thirdparty peripheral are simply too great to overcome.

While hardly revolutionary, *Meltdown* looks to be a generous package, with double the levels of the original. It's too early to tell if Awesome's alchemy has produced gold second time around, but the result certainly seems to be finely polished.







Responding to the request for a level editor, Bradley explains that "if you saw how complicated our editor is, you wouldn't ask that." Instead, the package will include a 'playground' that will allow players to explore most of the level objects





Return of the blob

While menu screens feature the eponymous blob dancing to the music, 'character design' has still caused the *Mercury* team its fair share of headaches in the quest to create a more mainstream game. "We still can't come up with a non-ridiculous method of anthropomorphising a blob of poisonous metal," sighs Bradley. Traditional approaches are not successful: "You could try putting eyes on it, but when it splits, does each blob have eyes?"

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **MINDSCAPE**
DEVELOPER: **OUTERLIGHT**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **JULY 11 (ONLINE)**
SEPTEMBER 15 (RETAIL)

The Ship

Now boarding: one steam liner, for frolics, murder and the trip of a (short) lifetime





There's cut-throat competition on-board The Ship. Turn your back at any moment, and you may find a razorblade, or any other kind of edged weapon, poised at your throat



Today's activities

While wandering the corridors of *The Ship*, players must see to a series of 'needs'. Like *The Sims*, these include emptying their bladder, washing or showering, social engagement, entertainment and taking a nap. Failure to see to your character's basic wants leads to you passing out. They tend to lead to some fascinating tactical conundrums – will you take a risk with the fire axe, or head back to a cabin for a nap? Most entertaining, though, is the 'trauma' state. Should you witness, or commit, too many murders, you'll need to visit a psychiatrist.





It's when your target pulls a gun, and is arrested for it, that it strikes home. *The Ship* is not like any multiplayer game you've played. And when you wait outside the brig, axe in hand, ready to put the blade between his shoulders, that you have a second realisation. Like the octogenarians that live aboard the QE2, you could call this place home.

Esoteric multiplayer games are rare – they need a base of support, or they go unplayed. So a game that does not conform, that does not attract gamers purely because they know they'll enjoy it, must be very good indeed to prove a draw. *The Ship*, once a *Half-Life* mod, now a budget online release, has the advantage of being every bit as good as it is inventive.

The set-up is unlike any other multiplayer game. Players are 'invited' by a mysterious Mr X to board a cruise liner. There, you discover that you are not on board to enjoy the canapés and swimming pool, but instead to assassinate your fellow passengers. One by one, you'll stalk the corridors, searching for your prey. Then, when you have them cornered, you'll use whatever comes to hand to fulfil your contract – be it golf club, flare gun or mannequin arm.

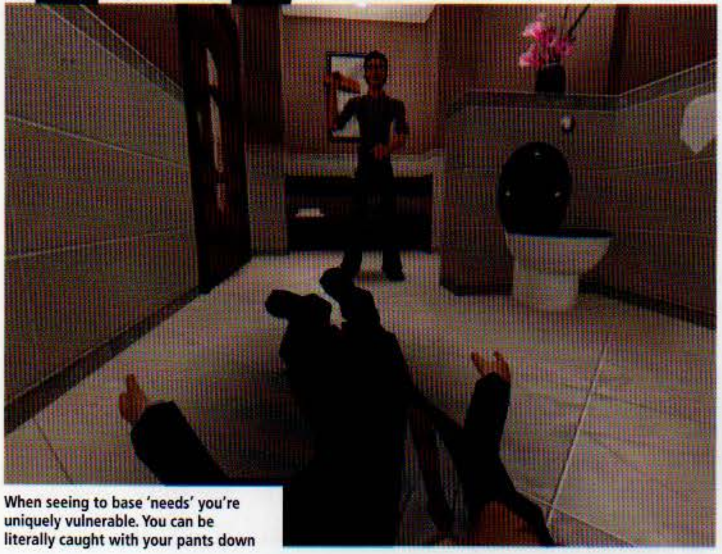
Sound simple? Well, for all that you're stalking, you're also being stalked – you've also been marked for death. While you're hunting, you're being hunted.It means there's an intense kind of paranoia about playing *The Ship*. Identifying players means walking up to them to chat, each time exposing you to a possible kill. Everyone moves at walking speed, roving from room to room, picking up weapons and seeing to their 'needs' (See 'Today's activities'). Any slight deviation from a prescribed path – a sudden jolt, a second glance, maybe even the drawing of a knife – leads to panic and rapid improvisation. There are some safe areas: the jail is weapon free, while guards stationed around the ship will rapidly arrest someone if they're caught with a weapon in plain sight. They can be bribed – each player starts with a considerable stipend that can be spent on clothes, food, booze and comedy monocles. Losing an online foe by donning an Abe Lincoln top-hat before nipping into the lavatory is a gaming moment you're unlikely to forget.

One question remains. Will *The Ship* be filled to capacity? To really work, servers need to be filled. The *Half-Life* release of *The Ship* saw a steady flow of curious players – but will that audience return? Although AI bots are provided, they're rarely satisfying to play against. Filling the ship requires thousands of players to buy into Outerlight's vision, and it's not yet clear if that many are ready to sign up for a cruise. We'll know in July, when *The Ship* departs on Valve's Steam delivery system.



Drinks and food can be bought at the ship's lounge bars. They will satisfy your hunger and thirst, but will shortly force you to head to nearest loo – and possibly into the path of a killer armed with a frying pan. The game's new look is a considerable step up from the *Half-Life* original





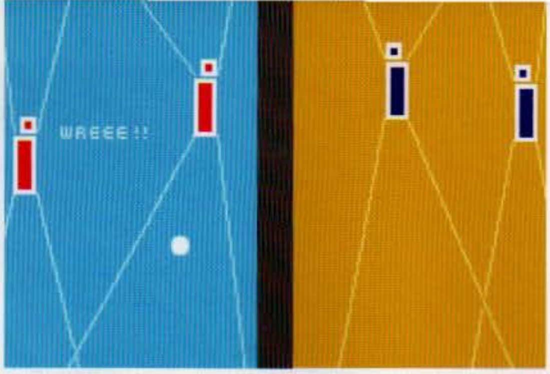
When seeing to base 'needs' you're uniquely vulnerable. You can be literally caught with your pants down



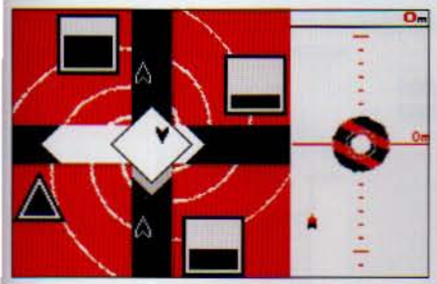
Weapons are culled from the ship's manifest or by rooting through other people's cabins. You can find hammers and fire-axes in toolboxes along corridors

Bit Generations

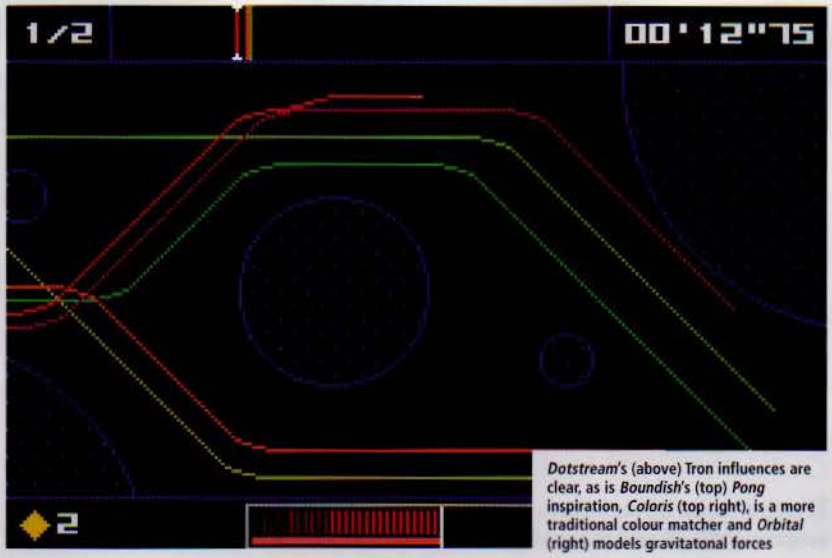
Can Nintendo save its last-gen hardware by bringing minigame bits and beats to a new generation?

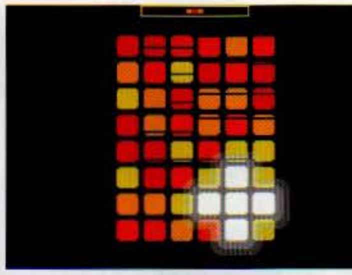


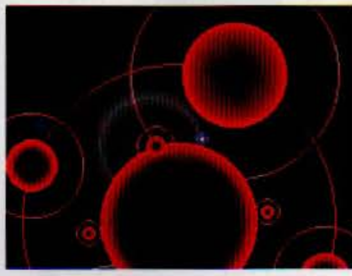
FORMAT: **GBA**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **VARIOUS**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **JULY (JAPAN)**



One of the most visually striking of the series, *Digidrive*'s limited palette and vehicular abstractions make a simple reading of the screen and its intended goals near impossible







***Dotstream*'s (above) Tron influences are clear, as is *Boundish*'s (top) *Pong* inspiration, *Coloris* (top right), is a more traditional colour matcher and *Orbital* (right) models gravitatonal forces**

In a sense, the great disappearing/reappearing act of Bit Generations series has mirrored the progress of Nintendo's famed second pillar. Revealed alongside the Game Boy Micro at E3 2005, the games – then known as the Digitylish series – took something of a second stage to the hardware, untitled and unplayable as they were but for a mostly-unseen video loop circulated sparsely across the net.

A year on in that hardware's lifespan, Nintendo finds itself facing a challenge: its third pillar has, unexpectedly, become its primary one. And, with the Micro's initially promising uptake dwindling, and developer support all but drying up, even Nintendo's own hardware designers are keeping the company's handheld legacy shrouded behind the DS Lite's cart-slot plug, making elegant design the main priority, rather than backward compatibility.

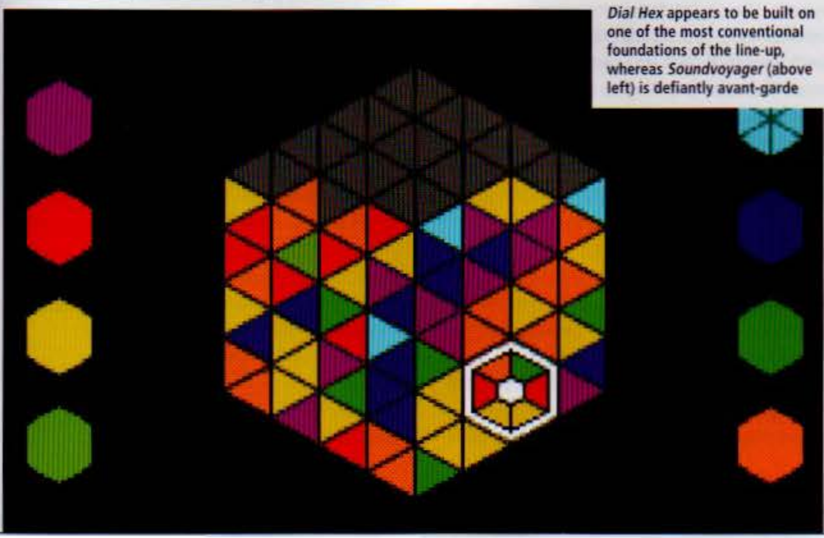
In response, Nintendo has brought the Digitylish games back to the fore, hoping both that DS developers have cleared enough public mindshare with games like *WarioWare* and *Rub Rabbits* to make simple, individual minigames a viable purchase, and that the games' rigid emphasis on pure colour and sound over complexity add an air of techno-fetishism in harmony with the Micro's own.

Developed by a small handful of select partner studios, including *Star Fox Command* developers Q-games and *Chibi Robo* creators Skip Ltd, each game will be offered at a cut rate ¥2,000 (£9) and will be released as part of a collectible series. The first series' line-up will include *Dotstream*, a sparsely designed racing game similar to Tron's light-cycles; *Boundish*, a multiplayer *Pong*-inspired collection of five tennis games; and *Dial Hex*, a puzzle game where players form hexagons of coloured triangles to clear them from the field.

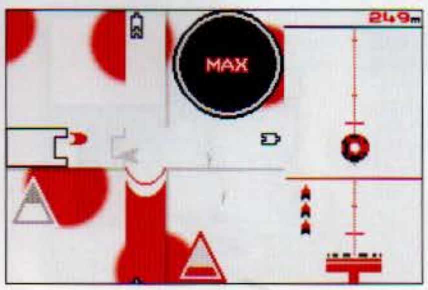
The second series will consist of *Coloris*, another colour-arranging puzzle game played out over a field of squares; *Digidrive*, a uniquely designed puzzler centring around roadsigns and traffic control; *Orbital*, in which players manipulate gravitational pull to change the trajectory of objects; and *Soundvoyager*, the most enigmatic of the seven titles, which uses sound to direct the player through the game with its visual component taking a back seat.

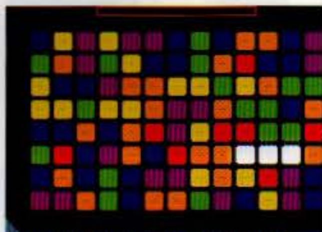
The question, of course, is whether creating a boutique line of comparatively inaccessible art games will help flagging sales, but with Nintendo's track record of bringing new styles of simplicity to a market pushing anything but, the games may just be the retro-chic ace up its sleeve.





***Dial Hex* appears to be built on one of the most conventional foundations of the line-up, whereas *Soundvoyager* (above left) is defiantly avant-garde**

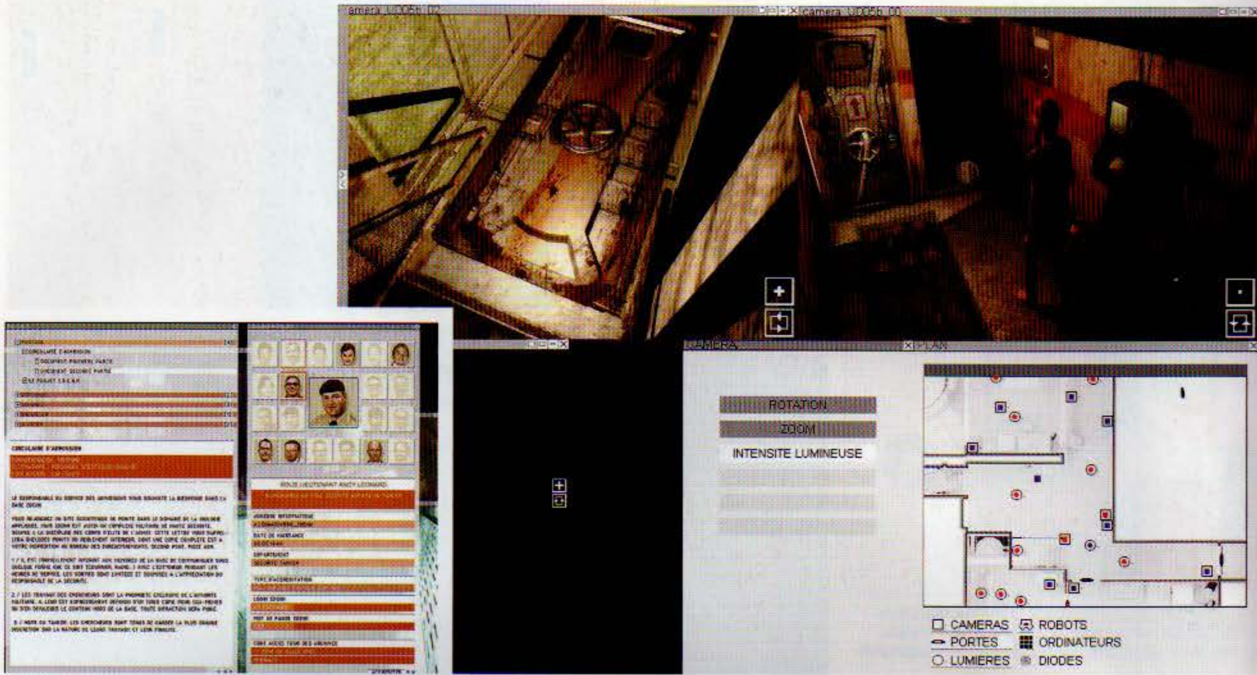




Talkin' about generations

The Bit Generations rebranding appears specifically designed as a counterpoint to the DS' Touch! Generations. Where the Touch brand is meant as a signifier that a particular title has appeal that extends to even the oldest of players, Bit seems to be the exclusive and slightly exclusionary Generation Y mark meant to appeal to an audience that would find Keigo 'Cornelius' Oyamada's sound direction in *Coloris* a selling point. Whether or not Nintendo continues to market new titles past these initial seven under the heading across any of its platforms is still unknown.





Through the base's intranet, you'll gain access to background information, and clearance codes too; the use of mundane browsing and email software is reminiscent of *In Memoriam*, although it's a step short of that game's real-world integration

Experience 112

The arthouse adventurers behind In Memoriam mix empowerment and frustration in this CCTV thriller

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **MICRO APPLICATION**
DEVELOPER: **LEXIS NUMÉRIQUE**
ORIGIN: **FRANCE**
RELEASE: **Q1 2007**

Like Yorda in *Ico*, heroine Léa isn't the superwoman kind, but she gets better at handling herself as the game progresses



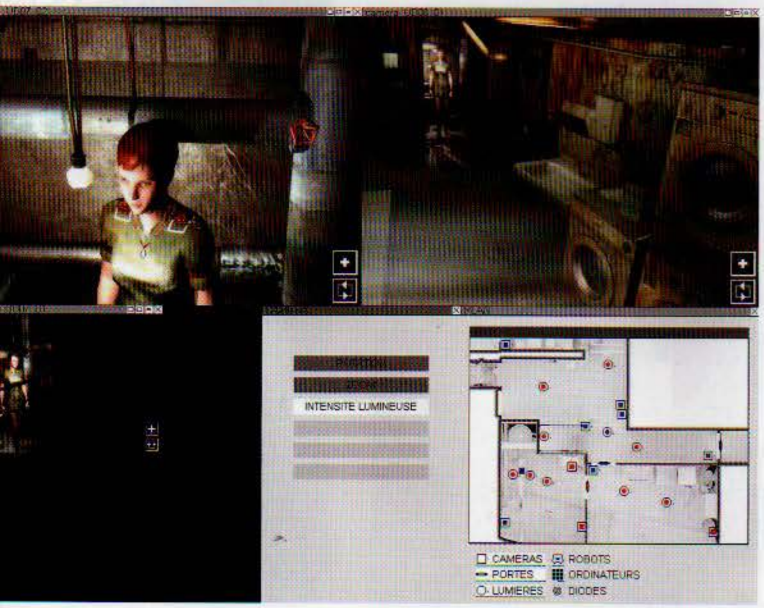
The founders of French studio Lexis Numérique have wide-ranging backgrounds – both technical and artistic – and their experiments in interaction span everything from casual and advergaming to serious adventures. And, as a consequence, it's no surprise that their approach to game design produces experiences a little different from the norm.

The latest of these (could it really be their 112th?) came into being when Lexis tried, near the end of development, to add surveillance cameras to its multimedia abduction mystery *In Memoriam*. The burden of introducing a whole new gameplay style and associated technologies led to the idea being dismissed, but one team member, Nicolas Delaye, decided to explore the concept's possibilities further. What resulted was Léa, an AI character who the player 'controls' through surveillance cameras, or rather, tries to influence: her motivation, actions and goals are totally independent. What links you is that she happens to be trapped in a military base, and you happen to be sat at its control desk.

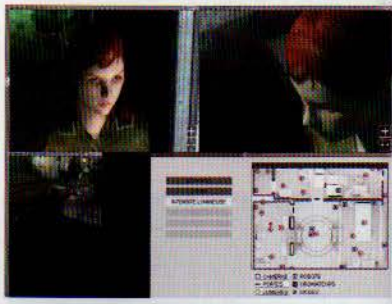
It's essentially a game of communication and exposition; finding ways to interact with her, discover who she is, who you are and why you're both where you are. You can hear her speak, but can only respond by operating doors, light switches, cameras and computers, as well as manipulating a few robots. She suggests communication codes, asks for what she needs and moves forward with your help. But you can't get from her more than she is willing to give, and there's a deliberate frustration born of the fact that you can't talk to her, even to protect her from a danger you're well aware of. Delaye's main inspiration for these mixed feelings of voyeurism and helplessness was, as is perhaps evident, Big Brother.

By contrast, the player will have considerable power to prevent Léa from achieving her own goals, and will be free to exercise it as they see fit. As the game unfolds, so does network access across more computers in more offices – Léa physically unlocking systems along her way – and with this access comes new abilities. At the start you can only see through one camera, then up to three at the same time, then you'll be able to zoom, then to rotate vertically and horizontally (allowing mimicry of nods and shakes of the head), then to detect heat signatures, then to analyse lip movements… And so, while you'll eventually gain total control over the base, in the traditional videogame sense – manipulating the actions of an avatar – control is withheld completely.

It's a novel idea with fascinating ramifications, both emotionally and practically. Its success will almost entirely depend on the strength of Léa's AI and characterisation: she'll need to be exceptionally engaging to compensate gamers for the loss of their accustomed control.







The map at the bottom right shows what's on (in red) and what's off (in blue). It's fully interactive: it takes just a click to have the camera screens change in realtime



The law enforcement community is more aggressive in this earlier, late-'90s rendition of Liberty City. At just half of the maximum wanted level, street beat cops throw out tyre-ruining spike strips, turning cars into awkward, juddering hovercraft







Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories

Eight months after hitting PSP, the younger, leaner GTA III prologue gets ported to an older, wiser console

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **ROCKSTAR GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **ROCKSTAR LEEDS**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW**



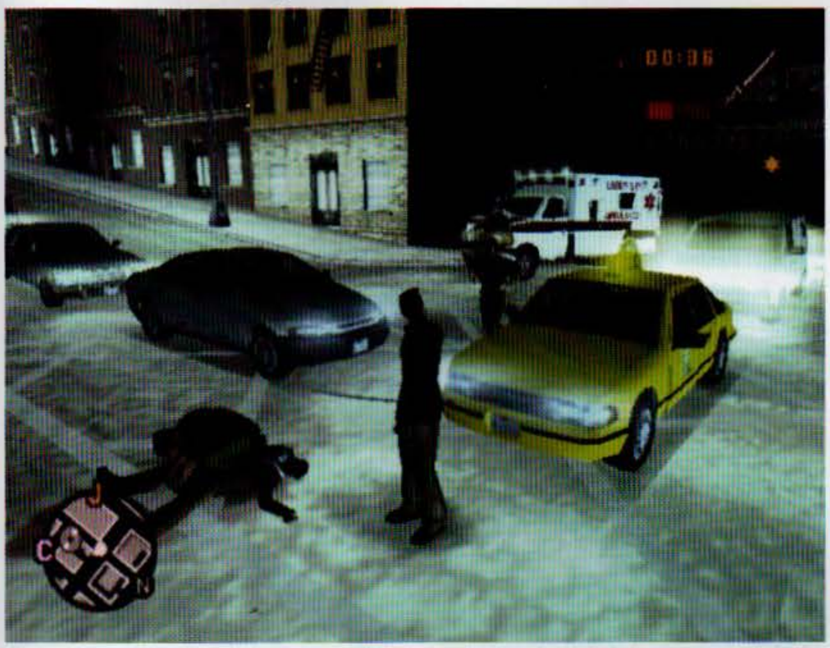
While the familiarity of Liberty City may breed contempt in those players who want to see *GTA* evolve, it holds an almost domestic bliss for those who are glad to return

So much has been said about the worth of converting PS2 franchises to PSP, the limitations of a fitting a large foot into a small shoe, and the ultimate benefit of so much regurgitation. The judgements have often found such games to be ultimately innocent of swindling gamers – witness *Burnout Legends'* compilation, or *Dynasty Warriors'* attempts to re-jig its format – but they rarely get off without a fine of some description.

Liberty City Stories is the first time that it goes the other way, the first game to have jumped *back* to PS2. Arguably, it's one of few franchises robust enough to make such a leap, to take a limited re-imagining and bring it back onto the more established and better-supported PS2, but *Liberty City Stories* has both the brand oomph and its strongest achievement – that it's a fully-fledged *GTA* running on a PSP – working in its favour. And the generic criticisms that heckle a PSP conversion in light of its big-screen relation – production values that can't keep pace with the refined looks of present-day titles, and a more limited feature set – remain in effect, acknowledged somewhat by the budget RRP. Its looks are cleaner, however, even if its framerate is still unflattering.

In terms of content, nothing has been added in the return journey to the home console (apart from a modified classic Liberty City Easter egg), and it simply remains an accomplished marriage of gunplay, on-foot exploration, gritty city life and vehicle action. Something has been lost, though, specifically PSP's multiplayer skirmishes; then again, something has been added thanks to an expanded, and hence superior, control system. Camera movement is now on a par with *San Andreas'* freedom, allowing players to look around while on the move, but the manual aiming function is still laboured, requiring the left stick to be clicked down in conjunction with the lock-on button.

Still, this is a more solid homecoming episode for 3D *GTA* than its portable genesis managed to be, a game that, for its critics, truly is more of the same but, for its fans, is an enjoyable expansion-pack perspective on the landmark stomping grounds that shaped the series.



As is to be expected from the conversion process, the missions are shorter than typical *GTA* fare. This doesn't feel like a drawback, but it means that the storyline can move along at a more energetic pace than in any previous *GTA* title



Reference reverence

"There are a million stories in Liberty City," boasts the box blurb. As much of an exaggeration as it sounds – or not, if each player that's visited its streets added their own experiences to the pile – it's not that far fetched. Like all *GTA* games, *LCS* is dense with references and wit, from the juvenile to the sophisticated, from the near-invisible to the obvious. A number of *GTAIII's* shortcomings and settings – its lack of bikes, for example, or Toni Cipriani's change in weight – are explained away, reinforcing the *GTA* games' affection for detail, an often unsung part of their appeal.

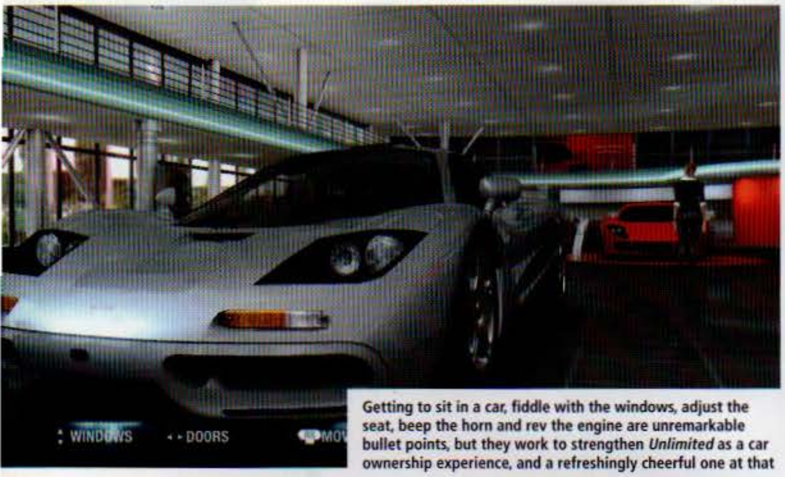
FORMAT: **360, PC, PS2, PSP**
PUBLISHER: **ATARI**
DEVELOPER: **EDEN STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **FRANCE**
RELEASE: **SEPTEMBER (360) Q4 (OTHERS)**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E153, E157, E164**

Test Drive Unlimited

An extensive hands-on aloha with Eden's sunny-side up racer unearths some daring driving that escapes first impressions









Getting to sit in a car, fiddle with the windows, adjust the seat, beep the horn and rev the engine are unremarkable bullet points, but they work to strengthen *Unlimited* as a car ownership experience, and a refreshingly cheerful one at that

When 360's tentative launch range was first published, it groaned as much as those reading it under the weight of driving games. But the reality of those titles – *Ridge Racer*, *Project Gotham* and *Need For Speed* – has proven to be something far more diverse than such a blunt pigeonhole could capture. Not least *Test Drive Unlimited*'s attempt to replicate the real-world Hawaiian island paradise of Oahu in a driving game whose lifestyle framing is focused on affluent adults instead of jousting alpha males.

The near-final game world presented is, despite the preview wrinkles, an achievement in its own right: a streaming, physically enormous landscape that dwarfs the cavernous planes of both *San Andreas* and *Oblivion* in terms of scale (but not possibility, obviously) crossed by a network of roads that takes around an hour to orbit in a low-class car via its continuous coastal routes. Circumscribing the island is an act that's hard to avoid for those hoping to experience the game's motorbikes out of the box – every car showroom has to be visited before players are allowed access to them, an odious task that's in danger of making the bike aspect feel peripheral. It could turn out to be a shame, as initial impressions point to them being a solidly entertaining firstperson ride.

Travelling around from showroom to showroom, if you choose, does ram two things home, however. The handling needs to be tweaked, but it's within the player's grasp – removing driving aids and raising the steering sensitivity helps bring each vehicle to life. Also, it reinforces just how much of Oahu's tarmac is just straight road, stretches that feel stunningly characterless to begin with. But it soon becomes clear that it can still work as a race course, whose thrills come from the slow slalom in between the medium-speed traffic that's avoidable only with concentration, as well as the fact that when a bend, junction or even just a dip in the track approaches, you'll be hitting it at top speed, giving it a surprisingly fresh-feeling daredevil aspect. Roads cover just a fraction of the island, but they're stretched out over the whole landmass, and it feels like there's a phenomenal amount of ground to be covered. Each explored road is highlighted with a bright blue trace, and an exhausting Achievement is offered for traversing every portion of it.

There's also a police presence that feels somewhat unnecessary, given that there's virtually no reward for reckless driving – bar the odd photo opportunity – and there are numerous challenges that do a solid job of enforcing a sense of civil obedience. Shopaholics need to be taxied home within a time limit, but have a very limited tolerance for rough driving. Car-delivery side quests are also available, a chance for budding players to get their hands on a supercar early on, along with hefty cash rewards for safe and careful completion rather than Ferris Bueller-style 'babysitting'.

After those first few hours of play, it becomes clear that the Xbox Live demo just wasn't enough of a taster to mull over, despite it leaving some sour. There's still plenty of potential here for that slow-burning holiday love affair with driving to blossom, albeit one that might not happen at first play.



***PGR3* offered in-car players the chance to snatch a quick left-to-right gawp at the game world flying past them, but in *Test Drive Unlimited* it's almost an obligation to ease off the pedal and drink in some of the scenery**



Once a building or challenge is found, it can be visited at any time from the map, a camera pullback that can fit the whole island on screen. What makes this feel sticky, though, is the game's insistence on autosaving every time



Dice 'n' dine

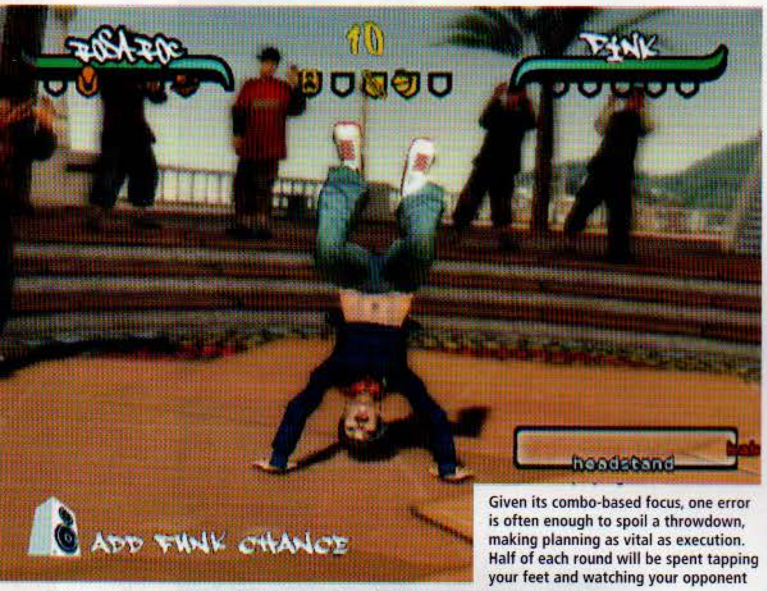
Among the building types to find and enter, Diners are home to the player challenges that have been created and shared by other users. What turns it into an addictive gambling den is the nature of the reward – each challenge has an entry fee, and the winner's pot is bulked up with the wasted fees of the losers, meaning the harder creations soon contain jackpots that snowball in a tempting manner. On another online note, leaving your garage to see other players streaking around as you conduct your own business is a queer feeling, an immigrant MMORPG sensation that feels nowhere near as intrusive as it may sound. But whether that will hold once the game's servers become more fully populated upon release, however, remains to be seen.



FORMAT: **PS2, PSP**
PUBLISHER: **SCEE**
DEVELOPER: **FREESTYLE GAMES**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **SEPTEMBER**

B-Boy

A dance-combat game that's not so much turn-based as headstand, toprock and spin-based



Given its combo-based focus, one error is often enough to spoil a throwdown, making planning as vital as execution. Half of each round will be spent tapping your feet and watching your opponent

The breakdance-offs that make up *B-Boy* may seem to settle snugly into the realm of rhythm-action, but in reality they're more about the combo-string skill of a beat 'em up – with a few key differences. There's far less button tapping to be done than in a typical fighting game, for one, but accuracy and forward planning are key. And it isn't so much one-on-one as one-by-one, with each player given the spotlight in turn while opponents stand on the sideline, jigging patiently.

There are four base moves, each mapped to a face button: Toprock, Babyfreeze, Windmill and Sixstep. These govern each of the four main categories of specials available, and you'll need to be performing a base in order to explore the more complex possibilities within each category, accessed through multiple D-pad presses. Some moves soak up power and can only be performed for a limited period of time, while balances need to be kept in check with L1/R1 via a meter. More demanding bar prompts appear for transitions between the more advanced pieces of mat work and failing to hold your balance or quit before power runs dry can leave you collapsed on the floor. You'll need each move to kick in and play out before switching to the next, hence the less furious pace than the typical rat-tat-tat of bemani, and the need for forethought over which base or extension to segue into next. Simply stepping around the floor in time with the beat can be chained as part of routine, too.

While the game's tutorial offers an explanation of the most basic of the basics, as it stands it provides poor-to-no coverage of such details as the unlocking, chaining and upgrading of moves, or indeed the scoring system, meaning that the career mode feels intimidating and nigh-on impenetrable. As things stand – a little worryingly, given the rapidly approaching launch date – jumping in at the deep end of arcade mode's practice arena with a preestablished breaker and simply experimenting proves to be the best teacher.

Otherwise, it's home to a groove-ridden jukebox of tunes and some eloquent animation, especially during freeze balances. Splats of graffiti bloom on the floor when the footwork starts flowing, and increasingly swish trails follow movements as more and more hype is built up during a strong performance; the latter offers feedback, but can obscure the finer movements of the player's avatar when in full effect.

It's a pleasure to see a rhythm-based experience that's not dependent on button-matching a string of prompts, but *B-Boy*'s in need of some heavy touch-ups in interface, camera and career mode before it can think of joining the A-list. It does, however, contain the kind of pace, flair and soundtrack that could make it matter, and it would be a shame to see it unfulfilled.



The 'diss' and other special moves can be activated once you've accrued enough hype. Hopefully, the goading commentator can be deactivated in the final version





Balance moves offer the best chance for admiring the generally excellent animation







Credit rating

In addition to an element of score building, aspects of your performance can earn trophies. A number of arcade modes are dedicated to earning such plaudits, which include unbroken chains, deft foundation work, good beat timing and creative variety, with each manoeuvre having a cool-down period with regards to the latter. Only one person can take an award, though, meaning that poaching trophies from opponents is one of the best ways to turn the tide.



The PSP iteration is virtually identical, even down to the control scheme and placeholder screens, and handles well. If the balance meters were more demanding and required more fiddling with the shoulder buttons, it would be a different story

FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **SEPTEMBER**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E163, E156**

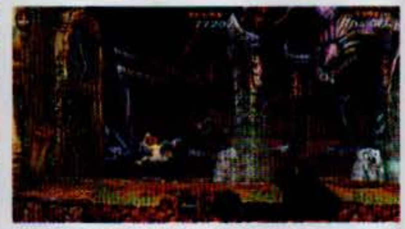
Ultimate Ghosts 'n' Goblins

The tears are gone, but the sweat and blood remains. Arise, Sir Arthur



A deceptively nostalgic opening builds towards a euphoric climax, the 3D engine prizing itself ever further from the disciplined 2D plane. This boss is conjured out of pollen as it's shaken from lovingly-animated grass









As much as you'll curse it for springing a wizard right next to a major enemy spawn, you can guarantee that *Ultimate* will do so at every opportunity. You can almost hear the chuckling



Thumb war

What seemed at first to be a potentially game-breaking issue (one cruelly out of reach of Capcom's remedial touch) is actually one that players themselves can resolve if their thumb is up to the task. It is, of course, the PSP Dpad. Its sponginess causes blood-boiling split-second lag, and using the analogue nub only replaces one dead-zone with another, and feels fatally indecisive. Luckily, the forceful jab required for responsive play isn't as bad as you might expect, and the hardware's inherent stubbornness should withstand the added pressure. Still, it's quite conceivable that Capcom will end up rolling out another batch of its highly acclaimed Dpad caps.

Fear has long been regarded as the series' lifeblood, but thanks to a ballsy shift in the balance of player abilities versus intensity (by which we mean the player has sharper claws while the game remains malicious), *Ultimate Ghosts 'n' Goblins* finally offers a chance to be intrepid rather than scared.

You can still wage that traditional war of attrition if you want, stumbling through a thousand continues before collapsing over the finish line. But given that the timing of every swirling axe and gob of acidic bile has now been tweaked to encourage almost suicidal play, you'd make a poor Arthur if you did. And he, more than ever, is the character that Fujiwara and friends want you to become. His absurd heroism isn't a comic illustration any more, but a code of conduct, the game baiting you into squaring your jaw, hurdling into the mouth of death and thinking nothing of the times when only your dignity remains armoured.





Easy, Normal and Ultimate difficulty levels each affect a number of dynamics, from lives to power-up placements

Each enemy encounter hides a unique pattern of balls-to-the-wall leaps, timely dodges and opportune strikes that will get you through unscathed, and the prospect of finding and exploiting every one leaves few doubts over the game's long-term appeal. Though its overriding theme is death – a glorious tombola of death – *Ultimate* itself wants to live. It wants to be played, replayed, charted, confronted, defied… and only then defeated. Secret items are woven craftily into the fabric of every stage, hidden from all but eagle eyes and available only to the procurers of various upgraded abilities.

With its new shields and spells, *G'n'G* has completed a double jump from arcade to console. The first hop to Megadrive brought infinite continues and a realistic chance of completion. This second to PSP brings a far greater change of tack, capitalising on opportunities that conservative instinct previously dismissed. So where the coin-op template prohibited time-outs and strategy play, now there's a sizeable pop-up inventory. The charge and blast system of previous armours has given way to a more incremental power-up gauge, which cycles continuously thanks to liberally scattered potion bottles.

But some things never change, and Fujiwara is far too attuned to his game's appeal to think we'd ever want them to. The nefarious wizard still lurks in his outer dimension, crossing over at the most inconvenient times to turn you into a chicken, grasshopper, crone or skeleton, while the default jumping mechanic is rooted in tradition, committing you to whichever trajectory you chose when you left the ground. Zealously grabbing weapons as they materialise remains the novice mistake (the mortar weapons are as pitiful as ever), and boss encounters revel in trouncing the ill-prepared.

Ultimate has had the stamp of approval held over it now for longer than we'd expected, but it's clear that an irascible framerate is all that's keeping it aloft. When it finally falls and sets production lines in motion, it's hard to imagine anyone begrudging the delay.

FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **VIVENDI**
DEVELOPER: **REBELLION**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **JULY 21**

Miami Vice: The Game

Suprises all round: it's made by Rebellion, it's PSP only, and it's an action game that works on a handheld







Good use of cover is key, and the context sensitivity of your moves adapts well to boxes, sofas, bars and doorframes. Enemies are just as keen on hiding away, but some cover – like giant plant-pots – can be shot away to expose them

Miami Vice opens with an option screen that says as much about gaming's potential for wish fulfilment in four words as you could in 40,000: 'Please Select: Crockett/Tubbs'. Rebellion has taken the deftness for source material it showed with *Rogue Trooper* and applied it to Michael Mann's series (and now film) with a fizz of neon and a flare of cocktail-pink sunsets.

Much less perfunctory than you might expect of a handheld movie tie-in, *Miami Vice* is nonetheless a straightforward game of killing perps and busting drugs, but its simple pattern of run, duck and gun has been smartly honed for the PSP's unaccommodating controls. With a wholly automatic camera, holding the right shoulder button switches the nub from movement control to laser-sighted aim control, meaning that it's essential to steer Crockett (or, of course, Tubbs) behind some cover before you start to fire. Happily, almost every object in the game can be hidden behind and shot round, which perfectly recreates both the look of the shoot-outs you remember from the series and the methodical satisfaction of a decent light-gun game. This pleasure is amplified by the inclusion of a wifi twoplayer mode, which provides instant camaraderie as Crockett and Tubbs hole up behind a bar in a dealer-infested nightclub and pop their heads up Punch-and-Judy style as one takes aim while the other reloads. It may be that the singleplayer's appeal palls more quickly than you'd want, but it already seems clear that co-op offers a convivial thrill still mostly missing from the PSP's library.



Entirely unexpected is the inclusion of an *Every Extend*-inspired minigame (below), which unlocks upgrades to your weapons. The speedboat sections (left) are best in co-operative mode





Beyond the traditional shoot-outs, the main hub includes a trading minigame that allows you to play local drug dealers off against each other to get the best price for your confiscated stash. Money earned in this somewhat dubious way can be spent on new suits and better guns

Bliss Island

While Mutant Storm is being properly reloaded for a sequel, here's a game that's more suited to PomPom's name

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **CODEMASTERS**
DEVELOPER: **POMPOM**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **JULY**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E153**





The PC demo of *Bliss Island* is simple, undemanding and only hints at the complexity that's possible. A PSP version is set to 'evolve' the formula, geared more towards traditional gamers than the casual market

"Hoshi is a Zwooph!" begins *Bliss Island*'s story, exclamation mark and all. The only exclamations you'd notice in twin-stick shooter *Mutant Storm* were those that spurted out your mouth as you struggled to survive the onslaught, and the only story was a deafening loop of 'you can't run, nor can you hide'. *Bliss Island* is like some kind of karmic compensation for the unrelentingly hostile and suffocating audio-visual styling that made up *Mutant Storm*: it's a garish and jolly plaything that's part pinball and part basketball.

Zwoophs use their powerful trunks to make clouds over Bliss Island which provide rain for the land, but it's a dull enough vocation for them to get Fridays off. Which is where Hoshi's story comes in, as he amuses himself by using super-powered puffs of air to blow spiders and smiley-faced fruit around the screen. The fruit are the key currency here – feeding them into the gaping mouths of the Jigoka Monsters ups the score multiplier, which is lost if a fruit falls off the bottom of the screen, succumbing to gravity. Grinning flowers act as bumpers and offer points when struck, and spiders soon turn up to hamper the collisions – they need to be herded into holes and away from the Jigoka mouths to avoid losing points.

Minigames are promised, along with the opportunity to compete with other Zwoophs as Hoshi savours his day off, but no mention has yet been made of Xbox Live Arcade. Hopefully it'll make that particular transition since, even considering the gentle pace of the current PC demo, it already feels superior to the likes of *Feeding Frenzy*.



Hoshi sits at the bottom of the screen. He's not controlled directly, but scrolls to keep up with the player's reticule



FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **BROWNIE BROWN**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBA (UK)**

Magical Vacation: Itsutsu No Hoshi Ga Narabu Toki

A reprise for the tale of plucky pupils on a road trip to rescue their headmistress – this time, in space

Sometimes, a developer's name is enough for you to gauge whether you'll warm to its titles, and Brownie Brown is one such developer. Formed from ex-Square, ex-*Secret Of Mana* staff, its 2001 GBA title *Magical Vacation* was all lush pastel colour and a cast like a list of ice-creams: as one of Nintendo's 'communication RPGs', each link-up session would spawn an Amigo companion for use in the game.

Though never released in the west (a fate also befalling Skip's GameCube communication RPG, *Giftpia*), the game's strong local and import following has waited five years for this sequel, suitably subtitled 'When The Five Stars Are Aligned'. The shift to DS seems aware of both the hardware and the audience – the former addressed with stylus control for every aspect of gameplay, and expanded communication options both for Amigo generation and multiplayer dungeon exploration.

As for the audience, that aspect may prove more troublesome for fans of the first game's intricacy. Brownie Brown claims *MV2* is an RPG for anyone, even newcomers to the genre, and so the original's hefty list of elemental magics has been scaled back to only seven. The game takes place across a galaxy of five stars (with supplemental Darkness and Light stars), each representing an element: the heroes also have elemental affinities, boosted under the matching star.

MV2's timing has also had the side-effect of it following Square Enix's own *Children Of Mana* on DS – comparing the two may indicate that the true children of *Mana* have been holidaying elsewhere.



After Brownie Brown's simple but personable work on *Mother 3*, *MV2* lets the developer's graphical hair down





With exclusive stylus control, *MV2's* moving parts are staged on the bottom screen and the top reserved for statistics, conversations and artwork – including screen-spanning presentation for entering important areas, or squaring off against the oversized bosses (left)

Project Hacker

Nintendo and Red give players the chance to tap into network security by tapping their DS screens

FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **RED ENTERTAINMENT**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **JULY 13 (JAPAN)**



As Hollywood has taught us, and *Hacker* now confirms, gaining access to protected computer systems is a time-critical process of reaction-based graphic puzzles and otherwise nicely rendered and quite entertaining games

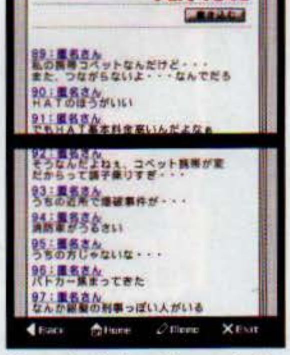
In a turn of events that most couldn't have predicted, the arrival of the DS has ushered in a western audience for one of the most traditional Japanese genres, the graphic adventure. A mainstay of the eastern diet since console and PC gaming's beginnings, warm receptions for Capcom's *Phoenix Wright* and Cing's *Another Code* seem to have convinced Nintendo of the genre's portable viability, evidenced in its publishing of Cing's forthcoming *Hotel Dusk*, and its enlistment of adventure vets Red to create *Project Hacker*.

Hacker follows the exploits (no pun intended) of Satoru and Rina, investigators with cyber-crime police unit GIS, as they work tirelessly to track down and fend off a dark net teeming with internet criminals. Its structure, similar to fellow adventure *Phoenix Wright*, will see the detectives through an investigation phase, gathering evidence both through traditional conversational means as well as by utilising the net itself through websites, email and anonymous BBSs, and using their DS as a bespoke PDA by reviewing case evidence on the upper screen while scribbling notes and clues on the bottom. Once confident enough in their direction, the true hacking begins, tapping into security systems and breaking through firewalls via a series of stylus based puzzles and minigames, bringing more action-based thrills to the otherwise leisurely experience.

Less alternate-reality based than its obvious kindred spirit, *Uplink*, *Project Hacker* looks instead simply to do for cyberspace what *Trauma Center* did for surgery. Though at this point it seems unlikely to make use of the relative unpredictability of wifi to bring its otherwise linear story further to life, given the proper localisation it might, at very least, be another welcome look at the style Japanese adventurers have been enjoying for decades.



Like most Japanese adventures, *Hacker* is played out in a series of 2D setpieces with occasional 3D flourishes



Clues to the identity and passwords of perpetrators can be found in BBS entries, where we can only hope they might be spelled out in overly-elaborate ASCII

MODERN LOVE

WHETHER YOU'RE A GAME CHARACTER OR A GAME PLAYER, DAVID CAGE THINKS THE NEXT GENERATION WILL MAKE YOU CRY

David Cage founded his studio, Quantic Dream, nearly ten years ago, and in that decade has pursued his vision of gaming's potential to interconnect with film and music, and to deliver emotional experiences whose depth and subtlety matches – or betters – established media. His agenda evolved from *Nomad Soul*'s examination of identity, through *Fahrenheit*'s examination of consequence, and is currently benchmarked by The Casting. Showcased by Sony at E3 as teaser for Quantic's upcoming *Heavy Rain* (also being developed for 360 and PC), this four-minute demo – all dialogue, all emotion, no action – showed a different face for how videogames may evolve. We caught up with him straight off a flight from Canada to ask what he's learned in the last ten years, and what he intends to accomplish in the next.

You're passionate about games needing better stories, and to do that it's clear they need to have stronger, more complex characters – which, for many game makers, means trying to make more realistic human characters. But why do strong characters have to be people, and why do they have to look real?

There are different aspects in creating believable complex characters – their visual appearance is just one of them. Their characterisation in the script, the way they move, the way they react, the way the player can interact with them – these are just as important as how they look. So I don't think that hyper-realism in itself is the ultimate goal – it is only a good choice when it fits what you want to say. It is like the different styles you can have in a painting – some are realistic, others are abstract, the only thing that really matters is the vision of the artist behind it and the emotional power of his art.

Certainly a character doesn't have to be realistic to generate empathy – many non realistic videogames have demonstrated that, and it is also true that it is definitely more difficult to create realistic characters. But it is also a very interesting challenge to analyse how an actor creates emotion and then to try to recreate it on a virtual character. I personally learn a lot just trying to understand where emotion comes from and how to generate it. To me, realism is the first step in better understanding emotion. What we learn will help us to create better non-realistic characters in the future.

And, on the other hand, I also believe that realism makes our media more instantly accessible to a wider audience. A lot of people have found it hard to be interested in characters that don't relate directly to what they know.

Games that try to tell complex and subtle stories nearly always have to limit the player's freedom of control and range of actions. Will there ever be a game with a sophisticated story which also offers real freedom of movement and a wide range of interaction?

The problem is quite simple: most games are based on repetitive patterns of controls assigned to a limited bank of animations – shooting, crouching, running, jumping, hiding, etc. So far, this is how most games are designed, for reasons related to interface and interactivity constraints. But storytelling hates patterns. A story where the hero could only do ten different actions would be quite boring. This is one of the many reasons why telling a good interactive story is such a challenge, because this structural issue has to be solved in a satisfying way.

The other issue is that a good story is all about pacing, surprises, twists and turns. If you give total freedom to the player, you give him control of the pacing of the storytelling, which may be fine in some experiences, but totally ruin others. I tried different solutions in *Nomad Soul* and *Fahrenheit*, and I felt that keeping control of the pacing in *Fahrenheit* was generally beneficial to the quality of the experience. In *Nomad Soul*, the large degree of freedom was sometimes an obstacle to the pacing of the story.

This compromise between freedom and storytelling is one of the biggest challenges we face. I guess we are all trying to reach the Holy Grail of emergent storytelling, a narrative experience where the story would not be written by anyone but would naturally emerge from interactivity. I believe it will happen in the future, but not any time soon.

It's still very rare to find a game with a strong story. Do you think that's because the people writing games don't have stories of their own that they're looking for a new way to tell, but are instead trying to come up with stories to fill the space in the middle of their game? How can we attract better story-tellers to games unless we can demonstrate that games are a good place to tell stories in the first place?

What is important to understand is that interactivity still needs to discover its own language. It is still very difficult to create an experience merging interactivity and storytelling. There are major issues, especially regarding interface, that still have to be solved. It is difficult to invent a language when there is no pen and when a new type of paper is being invented every week.

The quality of the story has never been a real priority in this industry. Videogames were originally invented by programmers, before artists and level designers took the lead. Very few companies have a writer in their core team because it is still not considered as an important element of a game – important in the sense that it will sell more copies.

I have been a consultant for a famous publisher to help talented Hollywood writers to write for games, and it left me with two thoughts: the first one was that in this industry we are generally a long way off the talent of the good movie writers. We are currently just kids playing in the schoolyard. But my second thought may seem contradictory. In my opinion, it is not the right solution to look for Hollywood talent to write stories for games. Our medium is inventing its own narrative language, and although it is definitely not finished, it is unique. It is not possible to take a movie writer and make him write a game, because he just won't understand interactivity.

In the end, my conclusion was that talented interactive writers will appear in the coming years, people with a real vision, a unique talent, who are liberated from the constraints of technology to focus on the experience they want to create. They will come with their own style and they will fully master the interactive language they helped to create. It will





Photography Jerome Bonnet

take time, they will probably make mistakes while they learn, but I am confident that these people will take the interactive media to the next stage and influence cinema and literature with their new vision.

In your games, how do you expect the player to relate to the game character? Do you want them to be able to step completely into the shoes of the character, so that they feel they are that person in the game, or do you think there must always be distance between the player and the avatar?
The relationship between the audience and characters in narrative is extremely complex. Although it has been massively studied in movies, I am still not sure this strange phenomenon is fully understood. Interactivity adds another layer of complexity.

My approach is to rely entirely on empathy. As a player or a spectator, once you care for a character, you project yourself emotionally onto this character and you feel what he feels. You don't have to make the player believe he *is* this character – I just try to create a strong sense of identification through empathy. It's a stronger way to do it, because then the player can play different characters in the same experience and still project himself on all of them. This is something movies have done for years with great success. They demonstrated that identification and empathy could be created in a couple of seconds with any character on screen. Think about the classic horror movies, like Evil Dead for example. The audience cares for every single character and feels their fear and their horror, although they are clearly not the main characters and we know that they probably won't reach the end of the movie.

To come back to your question, there is a distance between the player and his character, but there is an emotional link that can be established that will allow the player to feel what his character feels. I see this process as a more interesting and powerful way to access the player's emotions because I can directly relate to his emotions – his inner self – without having to go through his ego – his perception of himself.

In your games, it's clear you draw inspiration from film and TV. Do you think films can learn anything from games?
Definitely. And this is something currently underway. There are more and more creators in the games industry who have a unique vision and something to say. Fumito Ueda, for example, seems to have created a world that is truly unique and that goes beyond the game media. I spent a lot of time in Hollywood over the past year, enough to tell you that the movie industry is showing a growing interest in game creators, because they believe that we are inventing new stories, new ways of telling them and new visual ideas. And this is absolutely true. Games are probably one of the most fascinating media today – the most interesting exploratory field for new talents – and there is no doubt in my mind that some big names in the movie industry will come from videogames in the coming years.

How should films and games inter-relate? Where do you see the relationship between films and games ending up?
I see the relationships between films and games as a massive disaster resulting from a deep misunderstanding. This relationship has been mainly driven by marketing so far, which is definitely a mistake. I believe that creative people should have the initiative and control. This situation is definitely going to change in the coming years because the new generation of decision makers in movie studios – directors, writers and actors – are gamers themselves. They totally understand what makes this medium unique, and they will want to use it in a cleverer way than just as a licensed product of the movie to generate extra revenue.

Films and games should be conceived at the same time, so that they are not 'the movie of the game' or 'the game of the movie,' but a whole experience on two different but complementary platforms. The game should be an added expanded dimension to the movie. The only way to create this joint movie/game experience is to give the lead to creative people and have as much respect for the game as for the movie at all levels. Games should not be treated as a derivative product, but as an equally powerful and creative medium.

It used to be possible to make very ambitious games with very basic technology – things like *Elite* and *Midwinter* – because you could represent complex things very simply. Now, it's much harder to make games with such a big scope, because players expect everything to be fully modelled and fully interactive. Is today's technology actually acting as a barrier to ambitious games rather than enabling them?
I don't think so. Again, each game finds its own answer. Games like *Spore* or *World Of WarCraft*, offer a very large scope. I think that it comes down to the level of granularity the designer wants for his game and where he wants the focus to be. I absolutely loved *Midwinter* and I think that this type of game would still be feasible today. But I am personally very attached to the notion of a 'contract' with the player. The player can accept any rules if they are clearly established and consistent through the game. The same idea applies to granularity. With *Fahrenheit*, I started exploring the idea of having a lot of actions in very small and confined environments, which means a very fine granularity.

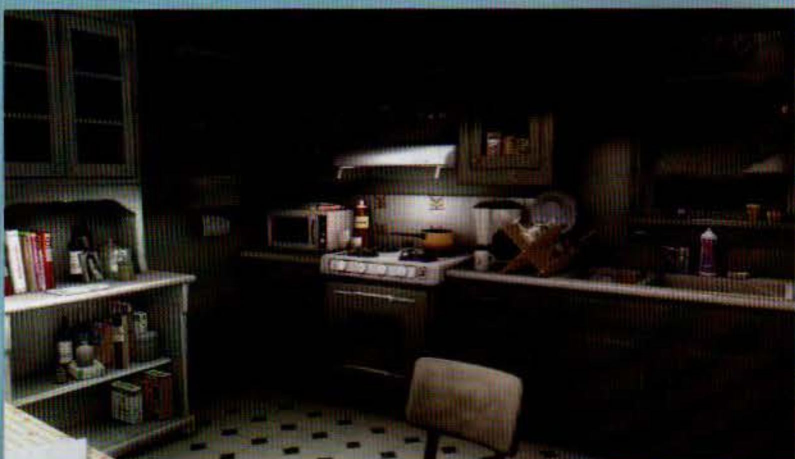
I also like the idea of putting a high level of detail in a limited space, the way we did in the kitchen of the demo, with the tree branches moving outside or the raindrops on the window. It gives the possibility to create so much life in the background and to pay attention to details, instead of having to copy and paste blocks of buildings to create a full city. Again, I don't think there are any rules – it entirely depends on the focus of the game design.

What do you feel you understand about game design and game storytelling that you didn't understand five years ago?
Writing *Fahrenheit* deeply changed my vision of game design and interactive storytelling. Or to be more specific, it made me have a vision. I realised that interactivity was not necessarily about killing monsters, but that its true essence was about making choices. Some of my favourite scenes of *Fahrenheit* are the less spectacular ones – those were the ones where I felt emotionally engaged. I realised that the pleasure we feel in front of any artform does not come from our external senses but from the emotions they provoke inside us. I discovered that there were ways of triggering these emotions for the player and that the pleasure of the experience would then be increased. Emotions could go far beyond the traditional ones usually found in games – power, frustration, anger, pride – they could be as diverse as those we experience in real life, without limitations. We just need to find the right words in our language.

Finally, I discovered the importance of fighting for what I believed in, while remaining open to others. If you are sincere, passionate and dedicated to what you are doing, sooner or later the audience will feel it. I've believed in emotions and storytelling for ten years, at times where no one in this industry was talking about anything else but shooting or driving. Times are changing and what we fight for at Quantic Dream – emotion – may finally be becoming the future of this industry.

"GAMES ARE ONE OF THE MOST FASCINATING MEDIA TODAY – THE MOST INTERESTING EXPLORATORY FIELD FOR NEW TALENT"







FACE TO FACE

The Casting is a tech demo for Quantic Dream's new franchise *Heavy Rain*, due in 2008. Presented as an audition tape from an aspiring performer, its focus is a four-minute monologue from a virtual character, scripted by Cage and based on a performance by actress Aurelie Bancilhon. How did it come about?

This demo was initially an internal prototype aiming to determine if we could recreate not only the likeness of a real actress but also her acting performance in its emotional dimension. We wanted her to go through different subtle emotions in a limited amount of time to see which emotions the prototype would be able to convey. The idea was to experiment with different technologies regarding a lot of points that were known to be particularly difficult, like body language, facial animation, tongue, long hair, animated fingers, lighting, eyes, etc. The demo had to run in realtime 3D on PlayStation 3.

When we told Sony about what we wanted to do, they asked us if they could have the demo at E3 on their booth. We knew that we would not have a final result at the time, but we decided to present our work at its actual stage. I must say I was a little bit scared of showing a girl talking for four minutes in a kitchen facing the camera at E3, where I knew most games would show armies of soldiers with tons of special effects.

In fact, we have been quite amazed by the feedback we received after this demo – it has been downloaded more than 800,000 times on the internet. I think it demonstrates that gamers have different expectations regarding next-gen titles. They don't want just the same games with more polys – they are really looking for next-gen concepts. Our demo was so different from other games at E3 that it probably intrigued a lot of people and drew their attention. Of course, we still have a lot of work to do to reach the quality we are aiming for, but given this demo was made entirely from scratch on a new console in a very short time, we are optimistic about our ability to significantly increase the quality for the game.

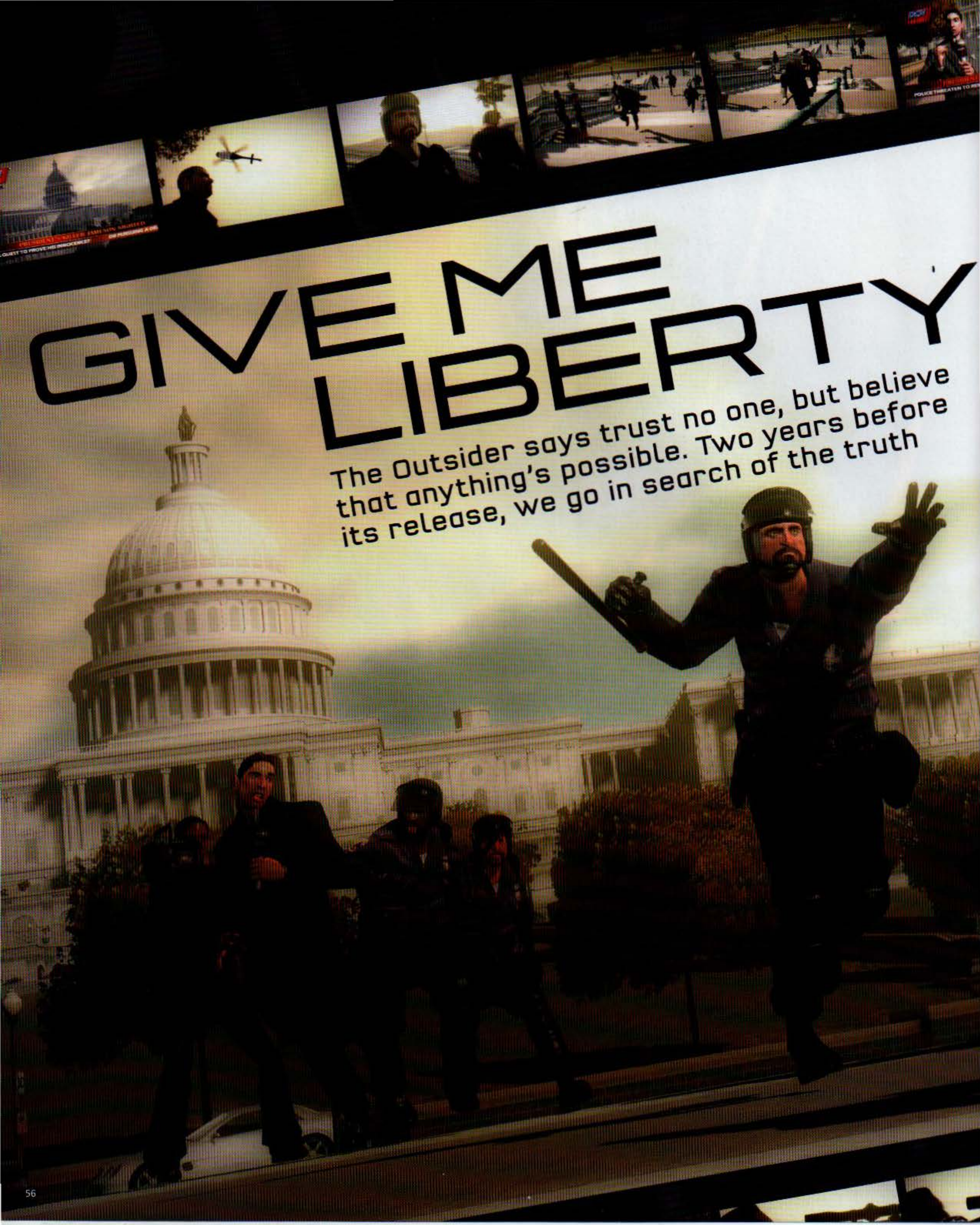
The most interesting aspect of this demo is that I believe we took the first step out of the uncanny valley. When I present this demo, I watch the audience. As soon as the actress appears, people listen to her. They find her shy and awkward at the beginning, listen with a smile to the story about her romance, are intrigued when she stands up and slowly goes into the dramatic part. They hold their breath when she puts the gun on her head and when the first tear falls, smile when she changes her mind.

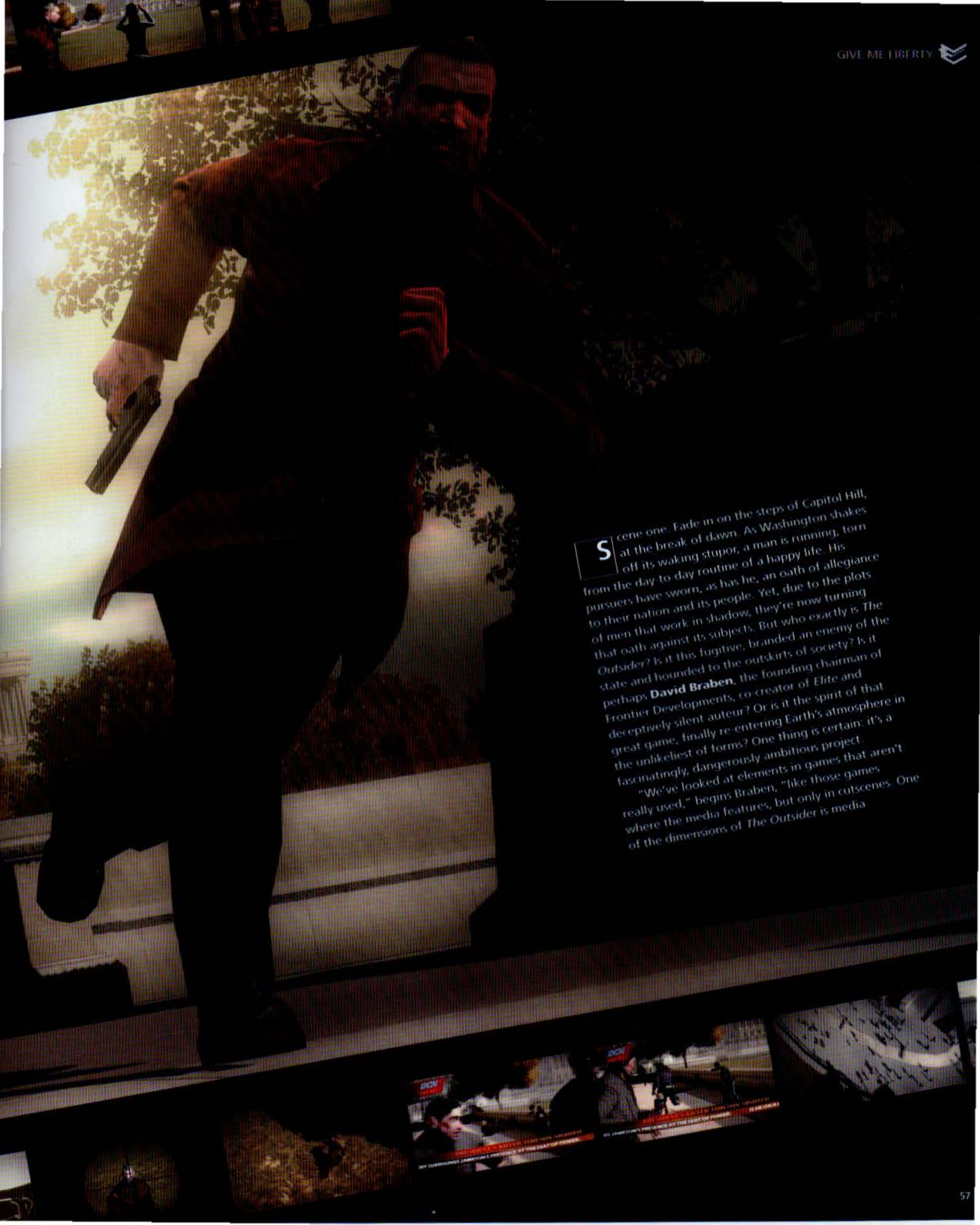
When the demo is finished, they've listened for four minutes to a character that does not exist and they cared for her. A lot of things can be improved in this demo from a technical point of view, but I think we really succeeded in creating a virtual actress expressing complex emotions and the subtle transitions between them.



GIVE ME LIBERTY

The Outsider says trust no one, but believe that anything's possible. Two years before its release, we go in search of the truth





Scene one. Fade in on the steps of Capitol Hill, at the break of dawn. As Washington shakes off its waking stupor, a man is running, torn from the day-to-day routine of a happy life. His pursuers have sworn, as has he, an oath of allegiance to their nation and its people. Yet, due to the plots of men that work in shadow, they're now turning that oath against its subjects. But who exactly is *The Outsider*? Is it this fugitive, branded an enemy of the state and hounded to the outskirts of society? Is it perhaps **David Braben**, the founding chairman of Frontier Developments, co-creator of *Elite* and deceptively silent auteur? Or is it the spirit of that great game, finally re-entering Earth's atmosphere in the unlikeliest of forms? One thing is certain: it's a fascinatingly, dangerously ambitious project.

"We've looked at elements in games that aren't really used," begins Braben, "like those games where the media features, but only in cutscenes. One of the dimensions of *The Outsider* is media



Jameson has his own government issue ride, but expect Outsider's Washington to offer alternatives. How you come to control them has yet to be disclosed, but the plan is to make a perilous gambit out of every breach of the law



"The problem with a lot of recent games is that I just don't empathise with the main character"



Though it's inevitably become synonymous with David Braben, Frontier is far from a one-man crusade. Over 100 people work at its Cambridge headquarters

manipulation; it's how the whole thing's been structured. Also, how do you create the experience of a thriller in a videogame world? That philosophy of 'if it moves, kill it' has always really annoyed me. There's a mindset that the whole of the industry's got itself into where if you punish someone for killing then that's a bad thing. There should always be a consequence. Like in *Elite*, where murder was illegal, and you'd have the police after you."

Still stationed in Cambridge, where his career began in 1982, Braben is hardly hot-footed himself, but remains entirely at pace with industry trends. He knows, for example, that a modern game built on ambition rather than recognisable IP needs to be loved to gain prominence, and replayed to endure. He accuses realism of having 'programmed out' the artistry of game design, and is troubled by retailers' insatiable uptake of used games over new. "It cheapens the whole thing," he sighs. "You go into a shop and it's like a jumble sale." Moreover, he appreciates gaming's acute proximity to cinema, and shares the belief that a videogame equivalent of Birth Of A Nation lies just around the corner. As Hollywood executives discovered at this year's E3, *The Outsider* is an industry-spanning concept: a sandbox action adventure game and a film, to be developed together.

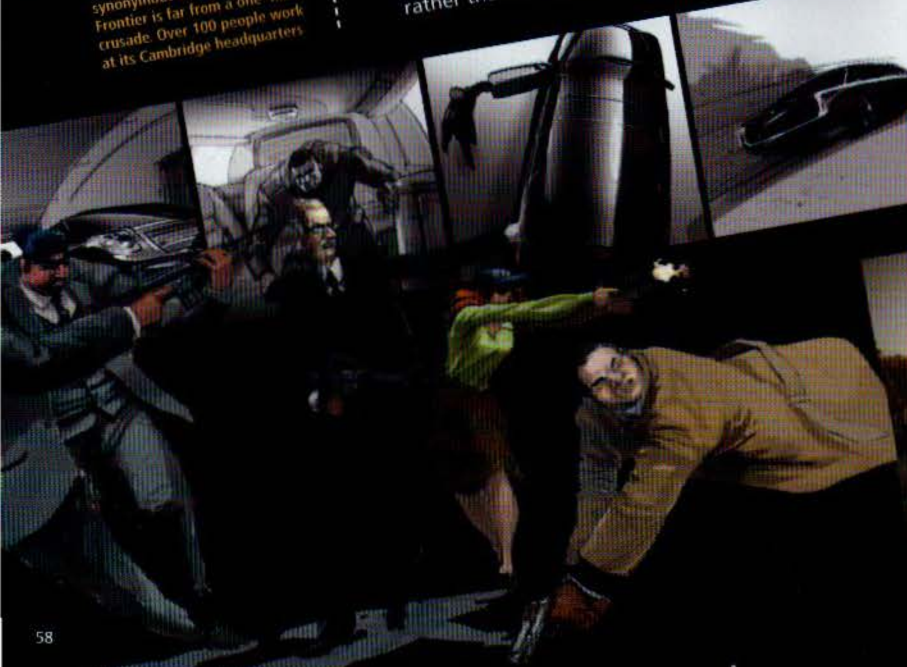
"If you look at film, which is still a very real environment, there's a lot of creative art content in there. You've got people like Ridley Scott, who use all those hesitant frames, choosing really lovely shots. The look of a scene conveys a lot of messages, as does the composition, yet it's something that gaming has completely lacked up to now. There are few people – Kojima is one – who have paid attention."

As befits anything coupled to the Hollywood machine, *The Outsider*'s silver screen activities are a black-op in themselves. Braben doesn't name any partners in this multimedia cabal, and when pressed for details reveals only that there are "a number of specific theys" interested in the project, which was conceived entirely at Frontier. "We're currently discussing ways of funding both the game and the film together, using external funding bodies," he continues. "What's identical across game and film is where the player will start. We're fully aware that the player probably won't follow the plot of the film, but that's there for them to take if they like. We're discussing several things regarding how we deal with that. There may even be slightly different prints of the movie." But that, it's maintained, is for someone else to decide. In organising this rendezvous with cinema, Braben's priority is to ensure that gaming can advance enough to meet it halfway.

"The problem with a lot of recent games, even those that have worked really well such as *GTA*, is that I just don't empathise with the main character, and with his plight. He [the generic *GTA* protagonist] is a hateful guy who pimps and runs drugs – a murderer – and you're forced to do that. *San Andreas*, I thought, opened quite well. There were four missions that you could do very quickly, and it clamped that down to just one thread. But then it was pretty much one thread throughout the rest of the game. That sort of thing, although very well executed, can go quickly to [a pattern of] gameplay-cutscene-gameplay, just providing you with venues for going from A-B. And I don't like the idea of being railroaded.









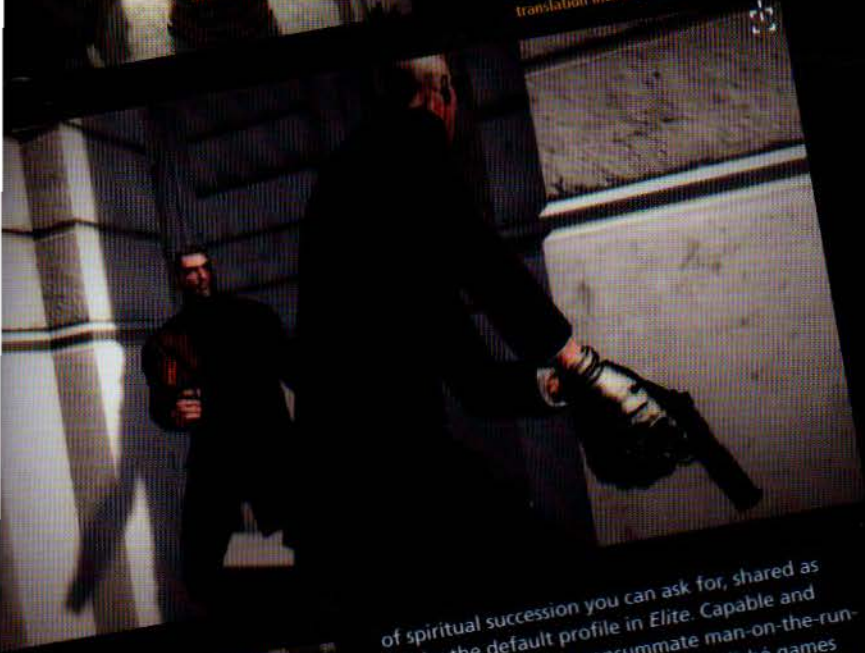
Vignetting – darkening of an image's corners – is a term often used in photography and cinema, and increasingly so in gaming

The tech demo bears evidence of The Outsider's AI crowd dynamics and traffic behaviour. Even if it's all placeholder, it's nonetheless an encouraging sign of progress



TITLE: **THE OUTSIDER**
FORMAT: **TBA**
PUBLISHER: **TBA**
DEVELOPER: **FRONTIER DEVELOPEMENTS**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **TBC**

It's nice to see Frontier designing expressive caricatures instead of the usual golems, and reassuring to see those qualities survive the translation into in-game assets





"The other thing that really irks me is that, if you've got a person who's one of a ten-million population of a city, then why on Earth should anyone give a toss what they do? Again, it's something that works very well in film: they set the player up as a key character early on. Capricorn One is a lovely film, where you've got that wonderful realisation scene that they're all dead, and then they've got to run away. I think that's where I first heard the term 'black helicopters,' and I've been into conspiracy theories ever since. Other films – The Fugitive, US Marshalls – have someone you can empathise with."

That someone, *The Outsider* will claim, is John Jameson – a character whose surname carries all the proof of spiritual succession you can ask for, shared as it is by the default profile in *Elite*. Capable and compromised, he's a consummate man-on-the-run-from-the-system-he-believed-in – a cliché games could rightfully scorn had they ever done it justice themselves. A CIA operative blamed for shooting down Air Force One and thus dispersing the President's ashes over the District of Columbia, Jameson faces high-level conspiracy at every turn, a society turned against him, and a mass-media that holds ultimate sway over his perceived innocence or guilt. Significantly, and to the benefit of Frontier's game, that presents him with a wide variety of options. Some are moral, others are not, and none are beyond the pale for a man in his position.

"Whether they're a good character or not isn't so much the point," adds Braben. "It's that they're suddenly plunged into a situation where you think, in a bizarre way, 'I could be plunged into this in a few days' time,' what with all the business of these people accused of terrorism. They probably haven't done it, and yet they've come downstairs one morning and, you know, they've got people saying: 'You've got bleach under your sink!' You do wonder.

"Because of the intricacies of the plot, especially with film studios involved, it's been constructed as a trilogy. That's as exciting for a film company as it is for us, because it means we can build characters that are very rich, who you can imagine leading lives in the future. Provided you don't kill them, of course."

FIRST ENCOUNTERS

Outsider was announced, almost a year ago, with a single screen of John Jameson and an anonymous, somewhat surprised official. Its purpose, Braben explains, was less to sell that game than to buy new studio staff. "One of the issues with projects like this is recruitment, so it was just to show we were doing next generation work. And given that you can't say whether you've got devkits or anything, it's a way of announcing what you're working on.

"The problem with being a games company is that you're always judged by what's out there, which is fine. But people assume that's what you're still working on, which we are – we're still working on current generation games – but the point is that it's a perception thing. People get easily pigeonholed in this business."

For those unfamiliar with the pigeonhole in question, here's a look inside:

A Dog's Life (2003)

It's easy to make jokes – not least because you could pick up your own dog eggs and drop them on your owner's shoes – but the subtleties of Braben's dog-sim produced a beguiling vision of how true role-play and sandbox sensibilities can combine



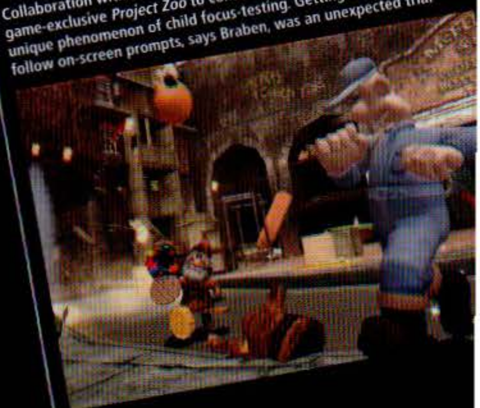
Rollercoaster Tycoon 3 (2004)

Frontier's first proper stab at succeeding Chris Sawyer's amusement park construction kit, following previous work porting the original game to Xbox and developing expansion packs for its sequel. This third instalment is a towering achievement, and a genre benchmark



Wallace & Gromit: Curse Of The Were-Rabbit (2005)

Collaboration with Aardman on bringing both its movie and the game-exclusive *Project Zoo* to consoles introduced Frontier to the unique phenomenon of child focus-testing. Getting the testers to follow on-screen prompts, says Braben, was an unexpected trial







Consider all that Outsider has yet to decide upon and suddenly 2008 seems like next week. The destructability of environments and the nature of interactions remain the subjects of discussion

BACK FROM SPACE

"The long-term strategy has always been to think about this ultimate game – about the things you have to do." Years since it was first suggested, the third sequel to *Elite* is still on its way, but not before time. "What's always made me feel uncomfortable," Braben continues, "is that any interaction with characters at the moment is either naff or involves killing them. That is a tragic shame. New technologies are really needed to fulfil our ambitions for *Elite IV*, quite a few of which are in *The Outsider*."

The man who, alongside Ian Bell, created the series makes no bones about how far its imitators have travelled since. "What *Eve Online* has done is taken the realisation from the first generation machines and moved it onto the fourth generation, but really it's the same game. Of course, they've permuted what you do and, to be fair, created a great online universe that has a huge following. What's interesting with the X guys is that from very early on they actually said: 'We're making *Elite*.' Then they expunged all that, but it's pretty clear what their origins were.

"The important thing with *Elite IV* is that we look at why you were playing the game, and come at it from a different way. Gary Penn described *GTA* to me as *Elite* in a city, and that's quite interesting. Of course, he was producer for a while on *Frontier*. But many of the early *Elite* copies saw *Elite* as just a spaceship flying around, which is not what it was, and a lot of them fell on their faces by doing so. *Federation Of Free Traders*, for example, just wasn't fun. It was interesting and prettier, but *Elite* was more about what was happening in your head.

"In a funny sort of way, it's a game I really really want. But I don't want to be disappointed. I think we've only got one shot at doing something great. It's getting that compulsion, and in this cynical day and age that's actually a lot harder to do, which is why I haven't been talking to any publishers about it. And I won't until the technology's there. We don't want to get bullied into something that doesn't live up to what it should be."

Lessons from the past, we suggest? "We learned a lot," admits Braben of *First Encounters*, the *Frontier* sequel that saw lawsuit and countersuit pass between Braben and publisher GameTek. "It was company that was going under, which is a perennial problem in this business. They messed around a lot, and the game really shouldn't have gone out the way it was – it was disgraceful.

"But it's certainly the case that we know a lot more now regarding potential deals, and I think the balance of power is certainly shifting in that regard. The scope for developers funding independent publishers is something that we're looking at for *Outsider*, where potentially the game and film get funded together. And I think that's very healthy."





Frontier's concept artists were said to be enthralled at the prospect of sketching an exhaustively characterised cast, and the results speak for themselves. Potential futures aside, there's backstory to characters such as news anchor Janey Reynolds and Mafia head Don Carlson, written in flesh, bone, cavities and contusions. As suggested by a particularly convincing showreel of facial animations, *Outsider* will have little trouble portraying credible, distinguished caricatures.

The expanded premise is that the CIA has spent several years stockpiling weapons, equipment and personnel, essentially by exaggerating the costs of war. That invisible resource of people 'killed,' vehicles 'lost' and munitions 'spent' is Jameson's inventory, married to the government clean-up squad from he's been forced to flee. Keeping you wealthy as well as equipped, it's also an antidote for the disruptive "bad obsessions" of free-roaming adventures. As the gaming adage goes, a man in search of justice has no time for manning the Lucky-Hit stand, and Braben takes that further by suggesting Jameson wouldn't even have time to eat.

Instead, he's expected to turn his oppressors' chief weapons against them: not the guns of the state police, but the microphones and cameras of network news. "You start off as public enemy number one; you are Lee Harvey Oswald. It's an interesting position from the point of view of a game, because there's not much more your enemies can do to you. And yet, much like The Fugitive, you don't need to do very much to raise some element of doubt. If you don't leg it to Brazil, for example, then there's clearly something strange going on. 'Why is he staying around?' becomes the media's first question. A lot of people in the CIA will believe you're innocent, because they know to a degree that there's corruption going on. You'll still be able to go and sign out those missiles that haven't been fired if you want. But that will have huge repercussions in the press, because the question might change to 'Did he provide the missiles to the terrorists?'

"But you're free to choose the information you feed to them, and we want to get players thinking again about their actions. So if you're caught in a firefight, so long as you clean off the gun you've used and put it in the right hand, it just looks like a shootout amongst the thugs. Because of the game's arena, the finger won't be pointed immediately at you unless there's a witness."

Braben refers religiously to this environment as 'Outsider's Washington,' but despite whichever reservations or stipulations have inspired that name, it's very much a real-world location. Its smothered sun basks the pillars of American government in a radiant light that's entirely devoid of warmth. Its streets are a checkerboard of



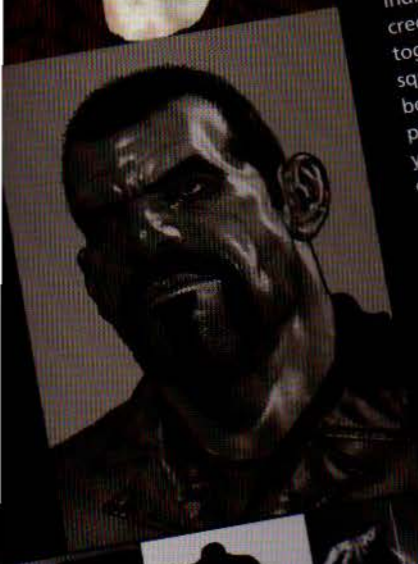




Capitol Hill has been the focus of all *Outsider* material made public thus far, but the final game will boast a full-size Washington DC



The makings of a man: Frontier's engine, like many to harness the nascent power of programmable shaders, can wipe off a sweating brow just as effortlessly as it can turn photorealism into the traced and accented style of a cartoon





Braben won't discuss *Outsider's* verbal interaction system, said to be intuitive yet versatile. Such is its simplicity, however, that the surrounding secrecy is attributed to a fear of theft rather than a lack of demonstrable progress





manoeuvrable pieces: citizens ripe for suggestion, brimming with post-September 11 paranoia. Each individual will possess unique AI credentials that, when brought together in a crowded street or square, form an organism that can both help and hinder. "They'd probably be absolutely terrified of you," says Braben, "but that reaction could change."

Of course, we've heard such promises before, of a world that ripples when the player throws stones. Looking back to **E**162, the result last time was described as "near-disastrous," and skulked away with a four. How will *The Outsider*, due in 2008 and presented as much as concept as reality, avoid becoming the next *Godfather*? "To an extent," believes Braben, "*The Godfather* was doomed to failure because they didn't look at it from the top down; they didn't look at the story and say: 'Well, what works best from the point of view of this game?' Also, there were practical problems. We, for example, couldn't do this sort of thing on the PS2. If we were suddenly told by the powers that be that we were doing this on PS2 and not on next gen any more, then we'd be like: 'Ah. We just told those guys at **Edge** that… never mind.' And it would essentially become a different game.

"Building the open world isn't the issue – that's something you can do on current generation machines. There's *GTA* and there are games that we've done that basically just stream content. What next gen enables are very sophisticated AI approaches, and essentially much richer games than you can do today."

That potential has agitated in Braben a fierce allergy to the idea of linear progression, especially in games that suggest otherwise. In *The Outsider*, from the off, the player will be free to navigate its entire world and meet with its key characters. Despite public scrutiny and the ferocity of his enemies' smear campaign, Jameson nonetheless retains an extraordinary contact book. Terrorists are on first name terms, organised crime lords will open their doors to him, and many within the CIA still regard him as a friend. "You've got a cellphone through which you can talk to, argue with or threaten anyone," explains Braben. "We've got a great many ways of ensuring that the player stays engaged.

"In a sense there's a lot of puzzle solving. For example, if there's something that you know is held in an office building, I want to make sure there are lots of different ways you can do it. You could disguise yourself, for example – that's an important



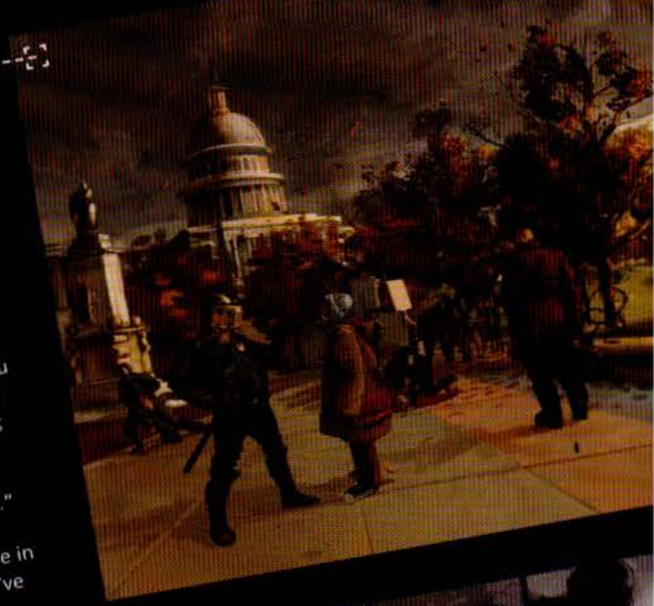
"What next gen enables are very sophisticated AI approaches, and much richer games than you can do today"







Both screenshots and concept art suggest a conflicted illustration of latter-day social paranoia. One will exhibit a stony-faced dearth of tone and spirit while the next revels in rich and vibrant satire





part of the game – go into the building and just search for it, and maybe you wouldn't get seen. You could blow the front off the building with a petrol tanker [laughs] and go in and out all guns blazing; you could persuade someone with a gun in their back. All these different approaches to the same problem will be treated differently by the media."

If this all sounds to you like a forest of conversation trees waiting to bloom, then you're in good company. But Braben insists otherwise: "I've always disliked these conversation tree issues.



"The way I see conversation, and there's no denying it's hard to get right, is more like a sword-fight"

Oblivion is the most recent example I can think of offhand. They're very prescribed, and you almost have to go through each option systematically to find out what's going on; it's utterly unengaging. I can see what the motivation is behind it, and some of the things that were being said about *Fahrenheit* before its release were positive, yet I came away feeling very disappointed. But it's great that people are trying to push that boundary.

"The way I see conversation, and there's no denying that it's a hard one to get right, is more like a sword-fight, especially in a pressurised situation. This is what I think is really weird with *Oblivion*, and it's the same with *Fahrenheit* – it's very modal. But in real life, and if you look at a thriller, people are shit scared, and much of the communication is non-verbal: there's slamming of tables and pulling of guns. We've looked at how to deal with that, and I think the important thing isn't so much the conversation, but the whole setting. A lot of conversation in that sort of scenario is simply threat and counter-threat.

"I love it when videogame characters give you feedback, and sadly that's almost never. Certainly in film there are a lot of one-on-one scenes in which volumes are spoken just by how the player's [a revealing use of the term] reacting. To give an example, say you've got a character that has some information, but doesn't want to give it to you. But actually he *does* want to give it you, he just doesn't want to be dead, because he knows that if he gives it to you, you could just kill him anyway. The way we see it working is that – if we use the term 'victim' for want of a better word – in the victim's mind, you're running a whole load of computational scripts to simulate intelligence. Each one is looking at a particular narrow issue that concerns that character, and there may be a dozen or so of these at any one time. Each is scored, and the winners feed into the victim's reactions.

"So let's say the guy's terrified of being killed because of the circumstance. What he thinks of you is being scored, and if you pull a gun, it'll raise that fear factor. That feeds into other scripted reactions – by 'scripted', I mean the way they're all managed – and from it there are two obvious ones: he can fight you or run away. Now, as those come into the ascendancy, if he's thinking of running away you might see him glance at the exit routes. He may not even be listening to you any more. So you could have a classic game moment where a character just jumps out of a first floor window, especially if there's a crowd and he thinks he has witnesses. These things are based on that character's personality, such as their cowardice versus their confidence, and you will have already telegraphed what those values are. The art of it is that, as in real life, you get a feel for how people are going to respond, which might of course be wrong.





Even with its visual filters and effects set to an exaggerated level, the *Outsider* engine we've seen boasts slick performance









So you've got a lot of interesting dynamics coming out of potentially very simple interactions."

At a time when HD is seen as a danger to the ambition of developers, and to the scale of their games, *The Outsider* is quite a proposal. Baited by the suggestion, Braben flashes up a recent in-house tech demo in which cutting-edge texture and lighting effects run wild over household objects. Our favourite is a spasmodic ball that bristles with inertia-affected fur. This, we're told, is why next-gen artists and content-makers will be free to create *more* rather than less, as the beautification process is shifted into the programming domain.

"It's a unifying thing: every scene has to look just right. You can go for real world locations and still have something that's quite artistic and far from the real. The point with all the *Outsider* shots we've shown is that we're now playing with light, we're simulating all of the scattering effects, radiosity and diffusion through trees. In the previous generation, it's something we only did with water, and we did it sparingly because it was mathematically costly.

"But it looks quite beautiful when you treat every surface, and that's where we can move forward. It doesn't take a great deal of time and effort to get it right, it's more a question of whether technology allows it. Then it's a case of someone sitting down with all the various settings. You can play with all of these things in realtime, from the grain size to the response of the different film emulsions. The irony of it is that we're simulating a lot of lens effects such as vignetting, and when you get rid of it, it becomes a lot flatter. And it's partly because we've been educated in cinema, and with defects of film cameras, and partly because it makes the scene. It's not just a flat thing where you paste things around in a circle. We want you to be able to look at this and straight away go: 'Oh look, it's *The Outsider*.'"

In more ways than one on this summer's day, the view from Frontier's offices boasts bright blue skies. Braben is convinced that he can take gaming to a higher plateau, adding weight to all three of our interpretations of his game's title. But it's hard to know how much of this is presentation, and how much brainstorming. *The Outsider* might well be a field of dreams – a grandiose document that may or may not become a groundbreaking experience. But as Braben works the sliders of a realtime Capitol Hill, ushering in a dozen permutations of the same shade of beauty, we find ourselves wanting very much to believe.

INTERNAL AFFAIRS

The success of *Rollercoaster Tycoon 3*, the *Wallace & Gromit* games and general business acumen has put Frontier in a commanding position. But Braben doesn't let that affect his overview of the British development scene. "It's depressing in many ways. A lot of other countries are actively trying to encourage companies to locate there, while development in Britain is almost discouraged by government. Also, a lot of developers are dealing with mobile games, which worries me because it's a crowded market that's shrinking in anticipation of 3D-enabled phones. Hats off to Codemasters and Eidos, still being based here, but I think that highlights another problem. You have a huge concentration of publishers in the US, but in Europe we've killed most of them off. It wouldn't surprise me if other big ones go in the next year or two. I'm quite bullish, the sad thing is that Frontier may well benefit – a lot of people come here from other developers. But it's not an ideal climate to be operating in."





The timeframe into which games of *The Outsider* are intended to fit is another of its mysteries. An urgent pace is the one guarantee





WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE LARA LADS?





The Angel Of Darkness seemed like the angel of death for the studio which created Lara Croft. Now, Core breaks its silence and speaks out

If a diplomat is someone who thinks twice before saying nothing, then Core's studio manager **Gavin Rummery** is well prepared for a career with the Foreign Office. Ask him what life has been like for Core over the last three years – three years that saw *Tomb Raider: The Angel Of Darkness* savaged by the press, the franchise shipped out to Crystal Dynamics, its old owners Eidos up for sale, its new owners SCi's decide to put Core on the market and its recent purchase by what is now the UK's biggest independent developer, Rebellion – and he says: "It's been a little bit... interesting'.

But from the outside, 'interesting' isn't the word that springs to mind. From the outside, Core looked butchered and abandoned. It took two weeks after *The Angel Of Darkness*'s 2003 release for it to be announced that studio head **Jeremy Heath-Smith** had been asked to leave, and just one more for the team to be told that Lara was to be ripped from her roots and handed over to an American studio. By early 2004 Heath-Smith, along with his brother Adrian, had founded Circle Studio, just down the road from Core's office in Derby, and staffed it entirely with their ex-employees. Jeremy Heath-Smith was scathing in his description of what was left behind: "Core Design is now floundering around with a handful of people trying to get a project off the ground, and no real leadership," he said in an interview in **E**134. And over the course of those years no word came out from Core to the contrary. Its PSP title *Free Running* was never released, and disappointing puzzle game *Smartbomb* seemed to confirm suspicions of a skeleton staff and limited remaining talent. But freed from the constraints of one acquisition process after another, it turns out that Core – still going strong with 65 employees, half the original *Tomb Raider* team and 30 million sales to its name – has some record-straightening to catch up on.

"It was mad. We had 40 people sitting here going: 'That's mad!'" recalls Rummery, of the Heath-Smiths' suggestion that Core was dead in the water after Circle had been set up. "It was very difficult, very frustrating. Obviously Jeremy was free to go off and totally promote Circle, and meanwhile Eidos was saying: 'Right, we'll hold off, we'll do a Core relaunch a bit later, it'll happ... oh, we're up for sale.'" And it just stopped. And then SCi stepped in, and they didn't want too many internal studios to run so they decided to look to see if they could sell us on – and in the middle of it our games were just getting chewed up in the mix of one



Crystal Dynamics' *TR: Legend* has proven the series can adapt to PSP. Eidos has confirmed an anniversary edition for the handheld, alongside PC and PS2

LARA'S FIRST STEPS

"I arrived two or three months in," recalls Rummery of joining the first *Tomb Raider* project, "and Toby said: 'This is what we're doing' and I said [pulls incredulous face] 'Are we...?'. When he described it to me I thought he was off his trolley. I've just come out of university, I've never worked on a game – there's only one other programmer here. Are you sure? My programmer brain was going 'a full 3D camera? How is that going to work?' and of course I had to design it from scratch, because no-one else was doing them." But this ambition brought great success, and the original *Tomb Raider* remains an icon of game design, just as Lara Croft remains an icon of characterisation. Its staying power was proved again by the recent leak of what seemed to be footage of a PSP remake of the original, which Core has since confirmed came from a cancelled internal project. The studio, of course, retains no rights to the *Tomb Raider* games – nor, indeed, to the name Core itself – and Eidos has recently confirmed that Crystal Dynamics will develop a game to mark Lara's tenth birthday.



sale after the next." And all this while still labouring under the blame for *TAOD*'s failings. "Eidos needed a scapegoat and we were it. Rather than say: 'Ah, well, we should have given it a bit more time', they just pointed the finger and said: 'They messed up.'"

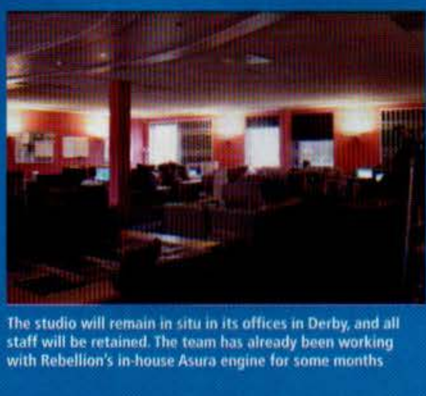
That question of blame was one that lingered after the game's release, however. Was it Eidos' fault for rushing the game out unfinished? Or was it the fault of executive producers the Heath-Smiths for not managing the game-making process better? Rummery's take on his former bosses' subsequent performance is customarily tactful: "Jeremy is an entrepreneur, and what he's done is gone and make a successful company." But while Circle Studio may still be a successful company, after the failure of *Without Warning* (E156, 3/10) it is no longer a videogame company, specialising instead in iDVD quiz games. Is there a sense of vindication? **Matt Sansam**, executive producer, can't resist a chuckle. "My favourite review was: '*Without Warning*. Consider yourself warned.' There was a lot of anticipation, definitely – a question of 'can he prove himself?' And he's certainly proved something." Indeed, Core is now seeing people returning from Circle, perhaps disillusioned with the direction the company has taken. "Since the split we've lost two guys to Circle, one of whom was a web developer, and we've had eight come back the other way, including some senior staff," explains Sansam.

So where does Core lay the blame for what went wrong with *TAOD*? "OK. Right," begins Rummery, and an explanation that's been dammed up for three years starts to tumble out. "*Angel Of Darkness* was a product of the old Core. Internally, we hadn't changed much as a studio from the first *Tomb Raider* games. It was small teams, working in isolation – very small teams, actually, the original *TR* was six people. Even by *TR5* it had only got up to the heady heights of 14, 15 people, so suddenly, for *TAOD*, it was a whole new process. Writing a new engine completely from scratch, even though we'd already developed PS2 engines within Core, because that was the way we worked. Thirty-five-odd people, the biggest team we'd ever had – tiny for a AAA PS2 game, but still the biggest team we'd ever worked with – and we had this deadline. It had to be out in a couple of years, and people just weren't confident from the start that we could do it. But that was the way we were told it had to be and, you know, we'd managed to hit all the deadlines in the past, so we hoped we could do it. As it went on it started to become apparent that it couldn't be done, but Eidos were like – it's got to be out, we haven't had our big *TR* rush of cash, it's got to be out, no ifs no buts. So it got past the Christmas slot, and it got closer and closer to their year-end, and they just said it has to come out, full stop. So at that point it was just like a machete was taken to the game and the design, and it was hacked to pieces. The guys on fan sites have dug around in the code and found all the content that was in there that was never wired up in the final game. It was just a shadow of the game it was supposed to



Matt Samsan (left) and Gavin Rummery relax in the screening room

"Angel Of Darkness was a product of the old Core. Internally, we hadn't changed much as a studio from the first Tomb Raider games"



The studio will remain in situ in its offices in Derby, and all staff will be retained. The team has already been working with Rebellion's in-house Asura engine for some months



be. Things like the character progression – the 'I feel stronger' when she pushes boxes – that was just the last stage of a much more complicated system which got cut out."

Sansam also acknowledges 'the kitchen sink problem'. "We were trying to do too much," he admits. "There was a muddying of the waters about who was pulling the direction of the game," explains Rummery, "because it was a bigger team and it didn't have a real central focus, someone who was saying do this, or don't do that. We ended up with a bit of a factional thing, which meant that you had things like the Paris section which never really fitted. And that was part of the shame of the game for things like reviews, because that was the bit of the game that people played, so a lot of the reviews were based on that. Of course, it got into more *Tomb Raidery* stuff later on, but I doubt many people got beyond those Paris streets where whole sections of gameplay had been utterly, utterly cut out. You had entire locations where you had one line of dialogue, and strange events where you would watch people doing a boxing match – you were actually supposed to learn your hand-to-hand combat moves in there, but of course that never got done. That whole section was very non-*Tomb Raider* to me, but it was born out of us not being used to bigger teams."

It was an ugly situation, and the mood within Core was initially bleak. "People weren't proud of the games themselves," recalls Rummery. "It looked really good, but the gameplay just wasn't up to scratch. It needed another six months, but it went out as it was, and everyone was pretty miserable to see it get mauled. But, to be fair, it did go on to sell around two million units." It wasn't a mood that lasted, however. With the establishment of Circle it soon became clear that everyone's jobs were



2001's *Project Eden* was in many ways a hallmark Core game. Its cleverly conceived team-based play was let down by some shoddy execution

CORE VALUES

Although synonymous with *Tomb Raider*, Core's other recent games – *Project Eden* and *Herdy Gerdy* – may provide the best hints of the direction the company wants to take. Is there something distinctive about the studio's games? "What we like to think it is that we put a twist on things," says Rummery. "I think if you look at the games we've made you'll see that. But what's been really frustrating is that a lot of them have just missed, like *Herdy Gerdy*, say. And what we hope going forward is to keep that innovation but actually back it up with solid production and take it all the way through, and not have a rush at the end. That is our mission. To still try to do stuff that is distinct, not just a super generic seen-it-all-before."



Herdy Gerdy, released in 2002, was hugely charismatic, but plagued by control problems





Both *Sniper Elite* (left) and *Rogue Trooper* have shown Rebellion's skills in finding an original slant for a game which at first sight seems a familiar proposition. The strength and reliability of the Asura engine gives the action in both a tangible solidity

REBELLIOUS NATURE

Rebellion, which made its name with *Aliens Versus Predator*, is now best known for its acquisition of 2000AD. That deal has so far led to only two games – *Judge Dredd: Dredd Versus Death* and *Rogue Trooper* – and is just one prong of Rebellion's plan, the others being original IP and work-for-hire projects. Last year's *Sniper Elite* showed the company's ability to zero in on an original aspect of an overcrowded genre – an approach much like the one Rummery describes as being the hallmark of Core's designs.

For **Jason Kingsley**, CEO and co-founder of Rebellion, the Core acquisition is an unexpected solution to the risk that the slow process of recruitment might have slowed Rebellion's planned expansion. "We weren't looking for a new studio, but we were growing, and there's a problem with expanding quickly and trying to keep the quality of the team high. You can hire, but only at a certain rate." Approached by a third party with the possibility of acquiring a new studio, Rebellion's response was initially cautious, aware of the potential difficulties of integrating new technologies and new staff. "But," says Kingsley, "we thought: 'Let's keep an open mind, let's see who it is'. But when we went up to Derby and realised it was Core, we thought: 'Crikey'. Here's a team with a fantastic track record, and with fantastic talent." The acquisition process started at the end of 2004, and was completed in mid-June. Sansam describes the wait as 'long and painful' although **Chris Kingsley** (Rebellion's CTO – one of the little ironies of the Core deal is that it puts the studio once again in the hands of a team of brothers) is quick to point out that "all acquisitions are slow and painful – this one has been a lot easier than the 2000AD deal". Indeed, the process was so streamlined that integration between the studios started almost immediately. "We had these guys coming up every week from the first moment they showed interest, and that really helped. And we started using their technology, the Asura engine, straight away because we'd been looking for some time at shifting onto one central technology," explains Rummery. "It's odd," continues Sansam, "because when the deal was announced – well, unofficially announced – we started to get calls from recruitment agencies saying: 'Oh, how are you guys doing, it must be a real shock,' and we were saying: 'Well, actually, we've been chatting to these guys in an on-going process for about six months and we're already sharing tech,' so it was a bit of an anticlimax when it was announced. People were asking: 'So how does it affect you?' and we were saying: 'No more than it did yesterday'.

The deal, along with Rebellion's acquisition of Strangelite, the makers of *Starship Troopers*, takes the studio's head-count up to around 240 people, making it one of the biggest independent game developers in Europe.



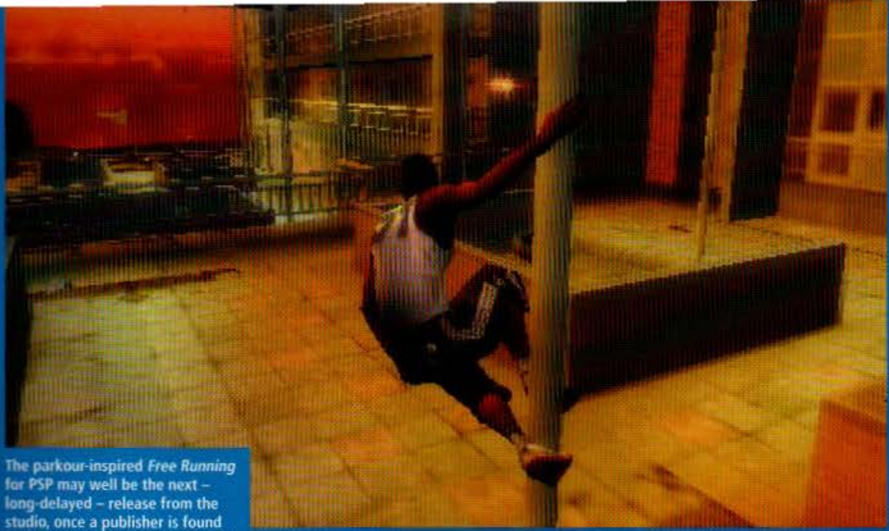
safe, whether they stuck with Eidos or jumped ship – "the devil you know," smiles Rummery, and it's not clear if he means Heath-Smith, or Eidos or both.

More surprisingly, for the team, losing *Tomb Raider* felt as much like a reward as a punishment. Rummery, one of the team behind the original game, has a veteran's perspective: "People sometimes forget that when you're an internal studio, you just have to do what you're being asked to do. By the time we were doing the late PlayStation games the teams here were saying: 'Look, could we work on something else now, or do we have to do *another* one?' It really started at the end of *TR2*. After the first game, when Toby decided to go because he was very pissed off with the way Eidos had decided to market his game, the rest of us stayed on. A few more people joined to work on the next game, but at the end of that we were burnt out. And then Eidos said: 'Right, time for number three!' and it was like – oof – we don't want to do a number three. We had already put all of our ideas into *TR2*. In the first game there were things we didn't get around to putting in, but in sequel we took it and made it a bit different, made it a bit more James Bondy. The two games complemented each other – we put in new things, new moves, vehicle sections. I couldn't really see, at that stage, where to go. And to be honest, where have the other games gone? Just more moves, more stuff, more vehicles. Nothing really has gone into that mix that wasn't there in the first couple of games. So we all stopped working on it and moved onto other projects, trying to escape the franchise, but where we weren't lucky is that it turns out you can't do that successfully in a studio which is making the next game in a big series, because the other projects just won't get the attention that they need. So we learnt that to our cost, too."

And, with *TAOD*, the situation had only



The Rebellion acquisition seems to have been welcomed by staff at the studio, glad to regain their independence and free themselves from the complications of Eidos' recent history



The parkour-inspired *Free Running* for PSP may well be the next – long-delayed – release from the studio, once a publisher is found

intensified. "My god, it had been a painful process for the guys who'd worked on that game," recalls Rummery. "They'd had a year of crunch, burnt out, very unhappy, and then had seen this miserable thing coming out at the end of it that they'd hardly wanted their named attached to, so it wasn't a very satisfying situation for them at all. So there was a sense of 'well, at least we've got a fresh start – this could be cool.'" Freed from Lara's legacy, a real sense of excitement took hold. "We were thinking: 'Hey, we haven't got *TR* hanging over us any more!'" says Rummery. "At the time there was a feeling that we hadn't got that millstone round our necks any more. Eidos said: 'Right, come up with some ideas of what games you want to work on,' and they were really surprised because they got 30 game concepts put forward in a fortnight. And they picked a couple to put into production and away we went. And, within Core, people had realised we couldn't continue working the way we had in the past – we had to get more organised, it couldn't just be a case of a bunch of people sitting in a room saying: 'OK, let's make a game'. You can't do that with a team of 30 people – it just doesn't work. So we said right, we've got to grow up and act like a proper software company. And that's been a massive shift. So we got a complete fresh start, which was a great opportunity."

But soon after things got started again, they hit another wall. "It was all cool for about a year," remembers Rummery, "but then Eidos really began to feel the pinch, because of course as a company they really depended on that regular *Tomb Raider* money, and as it became clear that Crystal weren't going to get the game out any time soon, they started to realise they needed to look for a buyer." And so, with the two prototypes underway – *Free Running* and *Smartbomb* – and with work beginning on another major project (this is still unannounced, although widely rumoured to be a sequel to *Shellshock: Vietnam*), Core found itself in the middle of a recruitment freeze. And this time it's Sansam's turn to describe that painful point as a moment when things became "interesting" all over again. They're frank about what it did to *Smartbomb* ("we got two bits right – we got the process right, and it was on time and on budget, but we didn't get the quality we were after," admits Rummery,) but are more frustrated at the fate of *Free Running*. Completed in time for the PSP's UK launch, it remains unreleased, although Core retains the rights and Rebellion will be seeking a new publisher for it. "It's a good game," asserts Rummery, while recognising that its first-generation looks may find it hard to compete with third-generation titles now ready for launch. "We learned a lot from it – a lot of very good techniques for moving a character around. In fact, we shared some of those ideas with Crystal, and they used them in *Legend*..." He shrugs, but it's clear the new incarnation of Lara is a sore point. What's it been like, watching another team develop what must feel like their baby?

"It would have been very easy to fix the mistakes of The Angel Of Darkness, because it wasn't fundamentally broken – it just wasn't finished off"

"It's been hard. What's been hard is knowing we could have done it, and knowing we could have done a good job. It would have been very easy to make another game and fix the mistakes of *TAOD*, because it was not fundamentally broken, it just needed to be finished off, but that opportunity went away. So we've just had to sit back and watch Crystal doing it. And the reality is obviously that they've produced a good game. But the frustration for us is that they've been given all the time they needed and a phenomenal budget. It's a budget bigger than we received for the previous six games added together – twice that, in fact – and it's really frustrating, because if we'd had that money..." Another shrug.

The acquisition by Rebellion, however, brings Core something much more valuable than money: freedom. "Core going back to its independent roots is quite exciting," acknowledges Rummery. "We can talk about doing new IP, we can talk about taking those IPs to more than one publisher. When you're an internal studio – obviously it's swings and roundabouts, because you get payroll made every month – but you're only pitching your game to one set of people, so if they don't like it, it stops. Whereas now, we know that some of those concepts may not be a sort of archetypal Eidos game, but we can pitch them to different publishers." And the Rebellion deal also brings access to its proprietary Asura engine, as well as a savvy production approach which balances the risks of original IP with licensed games and work-for-hire projects. So where does Core see the future taking it? Rummery puts it plainly. "People here have worked on the biggest franchise in the world. We've experienced being top of the charts, and we want to be there again."

At the peak of *Tomb Raider*'s success, Core had nothing to prove and everything to lose. The last three years have turned that situation on its head – the Rebellion deal may have given the studio a clean slate, but it has a reputation to rebuild from scratch. What's clear, though, is that it wouldn't want it any other way. The success of *Tomb Raider* had halted the studio's evolution, insulating it from the rapid changes in game development as other companies switched to new technology, new management practices and new funding models. But the videogame business is ruthlessly Darwinian: if only the fittest studios survive, then those studios still standing must be finding ways to fit. And in that, at least, Core is already an expert.



Free Running's controls are flexible, partly to offset the poor feedback of the PSP's nub and partly to reflect the freedom of parkour. The team intends to use the system in future games



A forgotten superpower is on the march again. Outdone only by Japan and the US, is France setting the fashion for the future of the industry?

At times it can seem like the games industry still exists in a state of cold war, mirroring the world climate it was born in: a standoff between two great superpowers in east and west, Japan and the US, with their vast domestic markets, platform holders, publishing titans and development armies. Great videogames are made across the world, of course – not least in the UK – and the combined European market has tremendous size and influence. But in every other country there is a missing link, and that link is publishers, companies with the clout, vision and internal, homegrown understanding of game production of a Capcom or an Electronic Arts. In every country that is, except one: France.

On paper, France could lay claim to the title of third videogame superpower. Three of the world's biggest publishers, Atari (in its current incarnation as a brand front for Infogrames), Vivendi Universal Games and Ubisoft have their roots there. In reality, that picture is a good deal less clear. Vivendi is a multinational conglomerate with interests far bigger than its gaming arm, is run from the US and has little or no investment in nurturing development in its country of birth. Atari takes its decisions on the other side of the Atlantic now too, is in a uncertain state financially and sold off


THIRD PLACE

The French touch

There's a simple stereotype of a French game, but the reality is much more complex. Alongside artistic ambitions and niche experiments are trends which include a pragmatic approach to the huge industry of sports games, and a talent for sneaking real innovations into otherwise conservative franchises. Read on for the six games which best represent the real face of French gaming.

TrackMania (Nadeo, 2003)
Indie iconoclasm



Nadeo proudly boasts that its simple, narrowband-friendly and free-to-play series of online stunt racers, with track-building options, has millions of players online worldwide – more than any single Xbox Live title. It's the product of a staff of just 12 – half of whom are friends from the computer club creator Castelnerac formed in his schooldays – and an idiosyncratic development methodology based on an extremely fast iterative process. "Our dream is to be able to make a new version every three months, and the problem is that we work so hard for this that we don't make any new games," laments Castelnerac.



Eden's *Test Drive Unlimited* is an example of how French devs are testing massmarket boundaries



David Cage of Quantic Dream, the writer-director of *Fahrenheit*



David Cohen Corval, former creative director at Nevrax

most of its French assets some time ago, although it does maintain ties with its homeland (notably by publishing Quantic Dream's *Fahrenheit*, and through its ownership of Lyon's Eden Games, currently developing *Test Drive Unlimited* and the next *Alone In The Dark*).

But that still leaves Ubisoft. The third most successful publisher in the European market and the fifth in the American, with an in-house development staff second in the world only to EA's, in practical terms there is no other game company of its stature outside Japan or the US. Founder, president and CEO **Yves Guillemot** considers it "an international company" – with some authority when you consider its major studios in Montreal, Shanghai and across Europe, North America and north Africa. But it is headquartered in France, on the outskirts of Paris, where Frenchmen like Guillemot and hugely influential chief creative officer **Serge Hascoët** lead a surprisingly unified and distinctive vision for the publisher and super-developer. It maintains three important studios in the country too, including the Montpellier home of its star **Michel Ancel**, and has enough French thirdparty commitments to bring its tally of homegrown games currently under development to eight.

What's strange is that France's traditional strength in publishing hasn't always been matched by a flourishing development scene. After a 16bit heyday in which they became famous for producing graphically beautiful, narrative-driven adventure games, French developers suffered badly when the tech bubble burst. But the beginnings of a renaissance are evident, with developers like Quantic, Eden and Arkane Studios (currently working on *Dark Messiah Of Might And Magic* for Ubisoft) showing games that seem to deftly toe the line between commercial appeal and genre-blurring innovation. The question is, can these developers meet the demands of an increasingly global and competitive videogame marketplace, yet retain the distinctive regional flavour of their work in the same way that their colleagues in the fiercely protected and individualistic French film and comic book industries have done? Is it even a bad thing if they can't? Indeed, does such a thing as a French game still exist? Over the next few pages, we speak to a cross-section of the French industry – from publishing executives and star designers to indie creators – and build up a suprising picture of this powerful, but contradictory, creative force.



Like *TrackMania*, Flash-based MMO *Dofus* shows a French indie taking an innovative, democratic approach to online gaming



***TrackMania* creator Castelnerac sees his game as proof that networks like Xbox Live aren't the key to online success, and that creativity is important**

The obvious place to start is at the beginning, and **Nicolas Gaume** is the man with the perspective to explain it. A bedroom programmer since his early teens, he founded Kalisto, developers of *Dark Earth* and *Nightmare Creatures*, in 1990 at the age of 19. When the company sank in the stock market turmoil of 2002 he moved on to consultancy, and now heads the new mobile games division at media group Lagardère.

"I think it was quite different from the UK industry in the '80s," he says. "The industry started way earlier in the UK, with producers coming over from the music and entertainment fields. And in the UK you had very dynamic hardware designers like Sinclair that drove content creation. There were people in between distribution and development – producers, facilitators – much earlier in the UK than in France, and in the US also. It was EA that invented the term producer; the core of their business model was to find a link between the business of selling and the art of making software.

"But in France, art and business have always been extremely segregated. We have a complicated relationship with money, and art is seen as an end in itself. It meant there was a very clear segmentation between the developing world and the publishing world. I tend to believe that these publishers became



Nadal says the setting of the next *Alone In The Dark* in Central Park isn't a sop to the American market. He identified it as an ideal game location six years ago

stronger because they had to develop their publishing structure and didn't take so many risks in development. Also they went public much earlier. On the one hand it didn't really stimulate the creative scene in France, on the other it got more exposure to the favoured ones – like *Alone In The Dark*. But it meant less independent developers, and that's still the case today."

The readiness with which Gaume uses the term 'art' to refer to game creation is telling, and indicative of the attitude to the new form among French developers at the time. There was an abundance of adventure games with highly-developed narratives, worlds realised with surprising depth, striking visuals and, often enough, remarkable technology behind them – games like *Captain Blood, Mortville Manor* and *BAT* from companies like Cryo, Lankhor, and Delphine. There was even a name for the phenomenon: 'the French touch'. French creators were unusually receptive to influence from other media which, in France, had a strong local flavour and a powerfully independent spirit.

"An important role was played by the Franco-Belgian comics," says *Rayman* and *Beyond Good & Evil* creator Ancel. "The French comics' authors are very creative. When I was young, I liked Astérix and Gaston Lagaffe a lot. Authors like Franquin can be named as influences for our games. I pay a lot of attention to the French comic books. It's one of the last places where one can find amazing authors. There are less and less media that allow such a great deal of creative freedom."

"Adventure games grasped this interest we French have in art," says Gaume. "We have a very strong comic book industry, and strong government subsidies for movie production. The visual arts in general in fact – maybe it's rooted in paintings, the Impressionists, and early movie directors like Meliès. For anything related to visuals and graphics, comic books and animation, we have very strong schools at a high level. That meant we had a very good available skillset, a good technical focus. Where we were always weaker was in bridging the gap between the elements of the game."

"For anything related to visuals and graphics, comic books and animation, we have very strong schools at a high level. We had a good available skillset, a good technical focus"



Arkane's Colantonio fell in love with *Ultima* when he was nine years old; he's always been more interested in American RPGs than French games, and this is reflected in his latest title, *Dark Messiah Of Might And Magic*



David Cohen Corval, creator of MMO *Ryzom*, says his French staff were very creative but lacked American-style discipline

It's a diplomatic way of saying that – although this era birthed several bona fide classics, including Delphine's *Another World*, and culminating in *Alone In The Dark* – a lot of 'French touch' games featured distinctly lacklustre gameplay beneath their mature technology and presentation. What had been a selling point quickly became an albatross around the industry's neck, and the current generation of creators are quick to distance themselves from it. "I don't like those words," says **David Nadal**, co-founder and game director at Eden, a younger company that made its name in a very different field with the *V-Rally* series. "The 'French touch' expression, for me, became pejorative." **Emmanuel Forsans**, a veteran of Cryo now running



Eden's David Nadal is currently helming *Test Drive* and *AITD*



Eric Viennot, co-founder of multimedia studio Lexis

Top Spin (PAM, 2003)
Special-interest sports



Thanks to its relatively high-profile subject matter, PAM's excellent tennis simulation is the most visible sports game to come from France, but it's the tip of a surprisingly sizeable iceberg. Niche sports are something of a specialist subject for the French games industry, especially among indies looking to flesh out their revenues: Nadeo has sailing sim series *Virtual Skipper*, Lexis the *Pippa Funnel* adventures in equestrianism and Cyanide earns a crust from *Cycling Manager* and the *Winter Challenge* snowsports games. Eden, however, eventually got frustrated with the mostly European appeal of this market, as David Nadal says: "I'd go to the States and talk about *V-Rally* and they'd say 'V-what?'"



ERE Informatique's Exxos label made its name with the bold and ambitiously odd *Captain Blood*

the French development portal and resource AFJV (Agence Française pour le Jeu Vidéo), agrees. "It definitely was seen as too much of an art before. It's easy for me to say, because I was like that. The first thing was to be famous, to make games for yourself. Today people are working to make money, which is a new thing and a good thing I think."

An over-eager financial market didn't help, as Forsans explains. "It was very, very easy to find lots of money with venture capitalists. Most companies spent their time making business plans, and they forget their first job, which was to create good games and not dreams for the market." **Raphael Colantonio**, CEO and creative director of Arkane, summarises their plight: "We were really suffering from a bad image, the games made here were said to be strong artistically but very boring and weak in gameplay. Investment was not on the ball compared to other countries, so I assume the country was behind for a while."

Either way, the result was a collapse in development on French soil, exacerbated by the eagerness of one Francophone culture across the Atlantic to strengthen its presence in the industry. "There were about 5,000 people working in development in France and it's about 500 today," says Gaume. "Quebec has been very aggressive in developing the multimedia environment. At Kalisto, 50 to 100 people moved to Quebec: there was an exodus." Notably, Ubisoft set up its biggest game factory in the Quebecois capital of Montreal.

But if French developers got hit harder than most when the tech bubble burst, the reverse was true for the country's publishers; according to a theory of Colantonio's, it actually presented them with a window of opportunity that led to their strong global presence today. "In '99, early 2000, the cracks appeared in the US market before the French one. In France it happened one or two years later, so if you look at Vivendi and Atari, it was a great opportunity for these guys to go to the US and purchase everybody. They found themselves in a situation where they owned half the world. But now the only publisher that's French for real is Ubisoft."





Infogrames strategy title *North & South* (top) may have been about the American Civil War, but was inspired by French comic Les Tuniques Bleues. Lankhor's *Mortville Manor* (above) is regarded as a classic whodunnit, but it seems a little dry today

"I think the major French publishers were the first to be anti-French, the first not to trust French developers. It's hard to convince publishers to work with French people"

Ask French developers whether the publisher presence in France has been an asset to the local industry, and you get a mixed response. On the one hand, even a die-hard indie developer like **Florent Castelnerac** (who runs the tiny 12-man

Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow (Ubisoft, 2004)
The Ubi difference



***Splinter Cell* may have been born in Montreal, and this second instalment's singleplayer crafted in Shanghai, but the arresting multiplayer mode that pit two radically different gameplay styles against each other – spies versus mercenaries, thirdperson versus firstperson, agility versus technology, stealth versus force – was all French, designed by Gunther Galipot and Ubisoft's Annecy team. It's testament to the company's willingness to innovate within the self-imposed restraints of licences and yearly franchise updates: "Our goal is that a game can be innovative and bring something new to a franchise, a real creation in its own right that can contribute something to a brand," says Guillemot.**



Nadeo founder and *TrackMania* creator Florent Castelnerac



Monaco-born Michel Ancel, head of Ubisoft Montpellier



Infogrames' *Hostage: Rescue Mission* was a triumph of striking style over repetitive content





Delphine's *Cruise For A Corpse* (top) is too ponderous to rank with the studio's best. Exxos' *Kult* (above) has a brave but impenetrable context-sensitive interface

Nadeo team that created PC stunt-racing franchise *TrackMania* and who steadfastly refuses to accept big-budget commissions to work on consoles for fear of losing his independence) grudgingly accepts their importance: "Publishers play a role," he says. "I know that Ubisoft is supporting some French studios, there's been a relay between Atari and Ubisoft, and others in the past." He sings the praises of his own French publisher Focus, a lightweight outfit of just 20 employees that perfectly mirrors his own.

But those involved more closely with the big names are more equivocal. "Do the big studios help French development? I'm not sure of that," says Nadal, despite Eden's position as a wholly-owned Atari subsidiary. "Atari was willing to sell all its studios, and Ubisoft didn't keep its French developers in France." Colantonio chimes in: "Ironically, I think the major French publishers were the first ones to be anti-French, they were the first ones not to trust French developers... It's very, very hard to convince publishers to work with French people. It's doubling the amount of effort, because we've really been suffering from a bad image for the last ten years, including in the eyes of our own publishers."

However, the situation is changing, with Ubisoft in particular showing renewed faith in French game makers, and most are happy to identify the improved mood, and the sound reasons for it. Excellence and originality became more than just the aims of every ambitious developer – they became mandatory. "Today there are a lot of French studios that are rising – I think the common element is that we had hard times and were obliged to propose excellent games," says Nadal. "We had to make publishers dream of investing in our studios, especially now a lot of licence projects go to eastern Europe and for cheap games France isn't competitive... We had to be really ambitious." Colantonio was satisfied to see the dedication to adventure gaming broken at the same time: "I think the image improvement started with a few titles in different genres – it's not like we have one genre now. There was *Omikron*, *Rayman*, and perhaps we at Arkane contributed to it a little with *Arx Fatalis* [a hardcore RPG in the American mould] because it was a big surprise, an unexpected game from a French developer."

The same can't quite be said for the work of Quantic Dream's **David Cage**. His games, *Omikron: The Nomad Soul* and *Fahrenheit*, are the link between French development's exciting future and its contentious past; lavishly-mounted, formally experimental, story-driven adventures that are quite prepared to disregard game design conventions. Cage remembers that it was a battle to find a publisher for *Fahrenheit* in the conservative atmosphere of the new decade, but is happy to note that the world now seems to be catching up with his ideas. "It was a moment of 'me too' products, where there were only five 'officially registered game genres' that were admitted, and where a movie licence was a must. In this context, coming with the idea of an experience based on storytelling and emotion on consoles was a total utopia. I remember people looking at me like if I was some kind of alien. Today, there is a high level of acceptance of the concepts I tried to develop, which makes my life much easier trying to sell my next new ideas to publishers. I am still testing their limits," he adds wryly, "but they tend to give me more credibility after *Fahrenheit* than before."

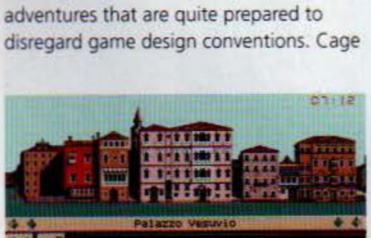
Cage is the embodiment of the auteur, an idealistic vision of the singular



Kalisto founder Nicolas Gaume, now working on mobile games



Raphael Colantonio, CEO and creative director of Arkane



Infogrames and Cobra Soft's *Murders In Venice* was a cultured detective game in the classic French mode

In Memoriam (Lexis, 2003)

Experiments in adventure



If *Fahrenheit* is the archetypal French interactive narrative of old reborn in the form of a slick Hollywood thriller, *In Memoriam* is its Euro-arthouse cousin, an experimental hybrid of film, puzzle games and the then-trendy world of internet-aware alternate reality gaming. Casting the player as himself, and seeping out of the confines of the game software into browsers and e-mail inboxes, its creepy detective story of abduction and serial killings persuasively blurred reality and fiction more than any game before or since. Lexis has a sequel planned, as well as a striking variation on the theme, *Experience 112*, previewed on page 38.



Exxos cemented its surrealist credentials with *Purple Saturn Day*. The goal is to win a kiss from the Queen

Another World (Delphine, 1990)
The graphic classic



If you had to pick one game to demonstrate the leading edge French games artists had in the 16bit era, it would be Eric Chahi's evergreen *Another World*, known as *Out Of This World* in the US. The game's combination of rotoscoping and vector graphics to create fluidly-animated yet subtly abstract and minimalist visuals, with a hand-drawn appearance, predated the cel-shading fad by over a decade. The game itself is a halting, staccato progression of set-pieces probably best left in fond memory, although its atmosphere and beauty are still overpowering. A high-resolution update can be downloaded from www.anotherworld.fr

creative artist that's enshrined in French culture. It was famously applied to film directors by the film-makers and critics of the French New Wave in the 1950s but whether the concept can really be applied to the collaborative world of game development – or to inform the seeming prevalence in French games of personalised visions from famous names like Cage and Ancel – is a thorny issue. "There is a lot of confusion about what words like 'auteur' or 'director' mean in our industry," says Cage. "I consider myself as the person carrying the vision of the game, which means I make totally subjective decisions with the only goal to keep them consistent. I can intervene in any department of the development to make sure the overall vision is respected and I believe that this subjective work, if done with honesty and creativity, is what brings value to the game. It is what makes the difference between a very good game and a game that is unique."

Inevitably, many interviewees instantly point to the likes of Peter Molyneux and Warren Spector as evidence that the French have no monopoly on bold individual visions in videogames, but equally most concede that French culture offers more recognition for the singular artist than most, and that this has



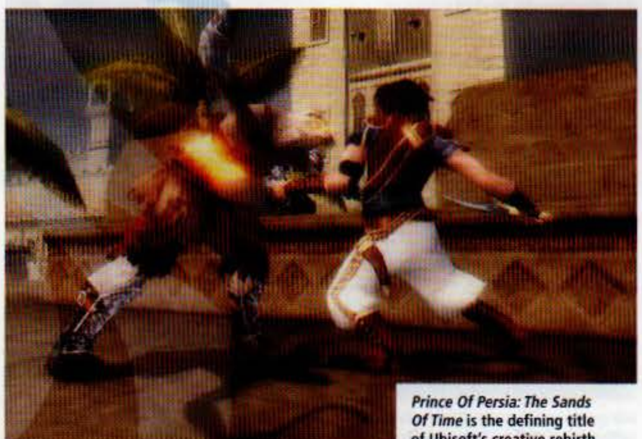
Serge Hascoët, chief creative officer of Ubisoft since 2000



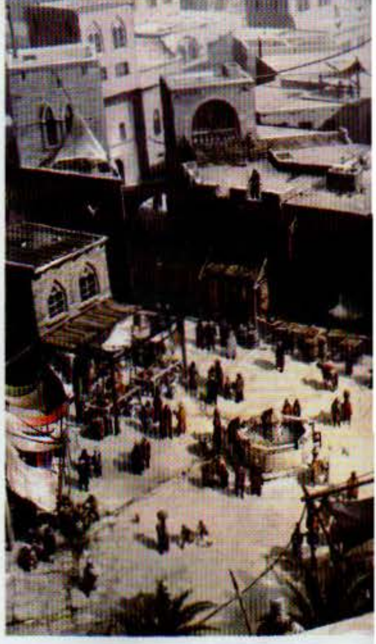
Yves Guillemot, co-founder, president and CEO of Ubisoft

probably influenced the course of game design in the country over the years. "Miyamoto acknowledged that when he came to France to get his medal," says **Eric Viennot** of Lexis Numérique, indie developers of both the experimental adventure *In Memoriam* and the niche, but profitable, *Pippa Funnel* equestrian games. He's referring to the title of Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres bestowed on the great Nintendo designer, alongside Ancel and *Alone In The Dark* creator Frédérick Raynal, by the French culture ministry this year. "He said that he's had numerous medals in his life, but none given by a government until then. The truth is we undoubtedly have a tradition of recognising personal creative talents more than any country in the world."

France may be a cultural greenhouse for creative industries like games production – with the added benefit that many of them (games, film, comics, animation) have overlapping skillsets and can and often do exchange staff – but it doesn't provide the best economic environment for development. Extremely high taxes – "for an employee to receive 100 euros, the company must pay 200," notes Forsans – combine with stringent 35-hour-week working regulations to make the country a difficult and expensive place to make games. Government subsidy is rare, although the Centre National de la Cinématographie offers some aid. "Starting any business in France is very hard," confirms Colantonio. "The structure is very conservative and very anti-risk. Another thing is that in our



***Prince Of Persia: The Sands Of Time* is the defining title of Ubisoft's creative rebirth**





Whether stylish like *XIII* (above), or more realistic like *Assassin's Creed* (top), Ubi's games are unmistakable

industry you need a lot of flexibility in terms of hiring and that's very difficult in France. There's a job-for-life mentality and it's hard to find people willing to be a contractor." (Oddly, the smallest developer we speak to, Nadeo, disagrees, with Castelnerac arguing that: "Those taxes are used to avert problems, and to minimise risk for everybody – employees and employers.")

It's this atmosphere that has driven Ubisoft to expand so much abroad. Guillemot, still head of the company he founded with his four brothers in 1986, defends the decision on quality grounds: "We decided a long time ago to create internal studios. We've felt for a long time that you have to do lots of R&D, create new tools and new engines. We are in lots of countries were the cost of production is not so high, so even if we have people where the cost of production is higher, the average is low. That allows us to take more risks on some games than some of our competitors, because we can afford to put more manpower on it. You see the results in our multiplayer modes, and the level of detail in our games."

If that's the case, why maintain the company's French presence at all? The answer comes from chief creative officer Hascoët ("a genius who really understands and plays games," according to Gaume, and who sets himself the objective of creating three new brands every two years). "It's about the skills of the French teams. For instance, French





Guillemot: "*BG&E* was great, but with three more months would have been exceptional. When you do a different game you have to do something that can't be criticised"

people are used to thinking about very abstract concepts, which is one of the main skills in designing a game, because you need to build very clear and simple systems that can emulate the real world, and then create challenging and interesting gameplay within it." Although Hascoët's relentless focus – drummed into all Ubisoft developers – on gameplay above all else hasn't always been associated with France, he maintains that French studios are very strong in the area. And you certainly can't imagine an American publishing guru giving his answer to the question of what makes a good game: "A good game should change players' lives, by improving their knowledge of themselves or others."

Despite a chequered past and a generally self-critical development community, the French industry still seems to prize its creative approach and original games as its chief assets, even at the highest level in the most successful publisher. But given that every publisher's enthusiastic embrace of the global marketplace, and the competitive environment the smaller studios find themselves in, isn't there a chance that any regional identity its games still have will be crushed out altogether?

"We can't make any profit by just aiming at our national market, while American or Japanese developers obviously can. Because we absolutely need to sell outside France, we can't cultivate our own culture," argues Viennot. Ancel agrees: "It is a fact that we are dominated by the American culture – as well as the Japanese one, to a lesser extent. It is obviously easier for anybody in Europe, be you French, Croatian or Italian, to communicate with a worldwide audience by using American 'codes' than by creating imaginary worlds based on our local culture. We know it's going to be more difficult if we make it too personal. The communication will be easier if it happens in a city everybody knows, in a world everybody understands. Therefore, choosing something other than an American city or heroic fantasy settings automatically means taking risks – which is exactly what I experienced with *Beyond Good & Evil*." In his view, though, it's nothing that can't be overcome with determined marketing. "I don't see any reason why Americans wouldn't like *Rayman*. But I see many reasons why Americans wouldn't buy it. Targeting the American market is quite a challenge for a new brand. It requires huge investment, and maybe a movie..."

"We can't make any profit by just aiming at our national market. Because we absolutely need to sell outside France, we can't cultivate our own culture"

Colantonio is more unrepentant. "We are a business, we want to have as broad an audience as possible. It's not a compromise, it's about making small changes to things like colour or the interface to make it more appealing to a particular country. It's not changing your vision. It's actually better this way."

It's not surprising that the most upbeat message on the creeping globalisation of the games industry comes from Guillemot, but his contention – that 'global' does not always equal 'American', and is not necessarily the enemy of regional diversity – has some weight, backed up by the unusual breadth and quality of his company's portfolio. "The goal is to have more diversity, to have studios all over the world that will try to influence the global industry. Even if we consider Europe and America first, we want to do games that can have a stronger European or American connotation depending on each game, we want them to be different one from the other. Look at *Prince Of Persia*, it's speaking about a totally different subject from what we usually do in the US, it has been influenced by people in Canada and Morocco. I want to ensure we have multinational creation in games."

It's the proud manifesto of a multinational company that no longer considers itself French, but it's also one that defends, indeed demands, the right of French developers – or British, or Polish, or Chinese – to make their own games in their own way. Like so much about Ubisoft and the wider French scene, it's a happy contradiction,and a welcome sign that between the games industry's twin colossi,there is a third way.



Even conventional franchises like *Rainbow Six* now share the Ubi tradition of a strong sense of place



Emmanuel Forsans of Agence Française pour le Jeu Vidéo

Rayman: Raving Rabbids (Ubisoft, 2006)

Open to inspiration



Ancel makes an anarchic return to the character he created, promising in this upcoming game an irreverent atmosphere that's part Monty Python and part Mars Attacks! as Rayman faces off (and dances off) with hordes of marauding, malevolent rabbits in this Wii launch title. "*Rayman* is a brand that allows a lot of creative possibilities, so I didn't want this one to be just like the previous one," he says. "A renewed *Rayman* was important for the players, but for us as well, so that we could enjoy working on it again."

Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

Now playing

Mutant Storm Reloaded



Even the sunniest of afternoons can't beat the lure of some friends, a projector and a Live Arcade marathon. *Geometry Wars* may have the cool; this has the class
360, POMPOM

New Super Mario Bros



It would be churlish to baptise a Lite with anything else, and Mario's tirelessly cheery "Bye-bye!" as you snap the DS shut lures you straight back for yet another go
DS, NINTENDO

Chibi Robo



Irresistible as he was in Japanese, Chibi's long-awaited PAL debut is excuse enough to revisit the charm – and the gentle domestic horror – of the robo's tiny, tinny adventures
GC, NINTENDO

The direct approach

Does freedom to look leave us staring into space?



The CCTV angles and rigid environments of *Resident Evil*'s remake are hardly modern, but remain some of the most attractive, delivering information in efficient and controlled bursts

It may have been a talking point in the days of games such as *Driller, Dark Side* and *Total Eclipse*, but the freedom to look around has long been taken for granted. Since 3D graphics and vertical level design collaborated to create mouselook, gamers and designers have never looked back, and raced on towards another perceived revolution – the living videogame world.

But aren't we leaving something behind? Was the *inability* to cast our eyes wherever we pleased actually as important as the freedom we now enjoy?

Modern games pride themselves on the degrees to which their worlds can be explored, scrutinised and measured in comparison to those seen before. Once, they like to remind us, all we were given were pixel-art postcards held behind glass. But the endurance of those fixed-frame images – the worlds of *Flashback, Oddworld, Beneath A Steel Sky* and a hundred others – is such that gaming still feels pained by their absence.

The old cycle of suggest and reveal, by which games as recent as the *Resident Evil* remake had you scratching at their doors to find out what the next room had in store, is a crucially important hook that entire genres seem to have forgotten how to employ. It's as if the demands of realtime 3D and the freelook POV have tightened the stranglehold on both artistic expression and the ability to keep us guessing.

Yet *Half-Life 2: Episode One*, like its predecessor, bucks the trend. Rather than bow to the desire for freer roam and larger worlds, it reinstates limits on where you go and what you see, bringing focus to its most spacious locales. Extraordinarily, you might not even realise that it's doing it. Characters gape off-screen, architecture conspires to funnel your view, and in a second you're concentrating on the handful of statuesque landmarks that define City 17.

It's a discipline that, for the price of a moment's intuition, could save other modern developers an awful lot of time and effort. As if to spite the leaps made elsewhere in procedural AI and wall-to-wall high-fidelity, the memory you take away from *Episode One* is of its simplest trick – a 3D skybox of the crumbling Citadel. For all the talk of run and gun, there's much to be said for good old stop and stare.









Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three,
4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven,
8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten



HALF-LIFE 2: EPISODE ONE

FORMAT: PC PRICE: $20 (£11) (ONLINE), £20 (RETAIL)
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: VALVE (ONLINE), EA (RETAIL)
DEVELOPER: VALVE PREVIOUSLY IN: E150



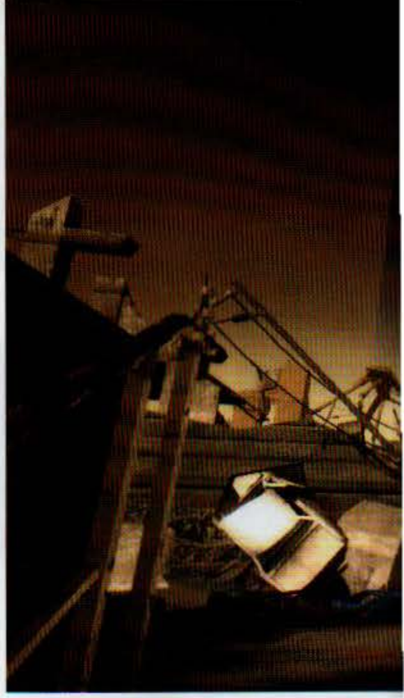
Episode One imposes a single, uncompromising objective: escape the coffin before the lid comes crashing shut. The sense of urgency isn't far from that of *HL2*'s conclusion, with anarchy on the streets, Combine stragglers losing their nerve, and a rebellion held together by a thread





Half-Life 2's climax was bad. Not inadequate, but cataclysmic; as in Ghostbusters crossing the streams bad; Indiana Jones on the rope bridge bad. It posed the question of how on Earth its heroes *could* survive, rather than how they would. For observers sat both mesmerised and mystified at their mice and keyboards, it could hardly have gone any better. For their part in that suicide gambit, they were given goodbye reassurance of Valve's merit as a visual storyteller, and of its desire – if this is how it closed the most anticipated game of all time – to make a real go of its soon-to-be announced follow-up episodes.

The first of those, once titled *Aftermath*, is a six-hour adventure trapped inside a moment: the return to clarity from the whiteout. The particulars of that emerging scene involve a crippled Citadel, outside of which Gordon Freeman and Alyx Vance have been miraculously transported to safety, in circumstances that we'll refrain from disclosing. Of *Half-Life 2*'s towering achievement, that says it all. Every moment, no matter how mundane, can be considered a spoiler. Every incident that, at heart, involves a common interaction or set-piece traditionalised by FPS history, is an event. It warrants a delicate synopsis.



A defining *Half-Life 2* strength was the depiction of City 17 as a microcosm of Combine-occupied Earth, a tradition Valve has upheld here with a show-stealing emergency broadcast from Dr Kleiner. Evacuation and procreation are his chief words of advice, eccentrically delivered

> Half-Life's narrative does nothing altogether new, but in an interactive genre bound to tradition it simply doesn't get more sophisticated than this

What *Episode One* brings to *Half-Life 2* is a series of vivid contrasts on a series of different levels. Where the catalytic incident at Black Mesa involved disaster, and the introduction of City 17 a resistance of tyranny, what follows now is a transition period of anarchy. All the forces neatly arranged in the previous game, fortified and pigeonholed, are now in a state of recoil – your goal as Freeman being to evacuate the dizzied human survivors before everything snaps ruthlessly beneath the Combine cosh. In this respect, what was remarkable in *Half-Life 2* is even more so here. With that game, Valve had the Grand Unified Theory of physics, together with one Viktor Antonov, to add flavour to the FPS template; now neither holds the same benefit of newness. It's a third element, just as instrumental to the achievement of that **Edge** 10, that's carrying the series forwards.

Scripting, of both dialogue and event, is a process over which Valve seems to have achieved exclusive mastery. *Half-Life*'s narrative does nothing altogether new, and nothing to upturn the quite reasonable

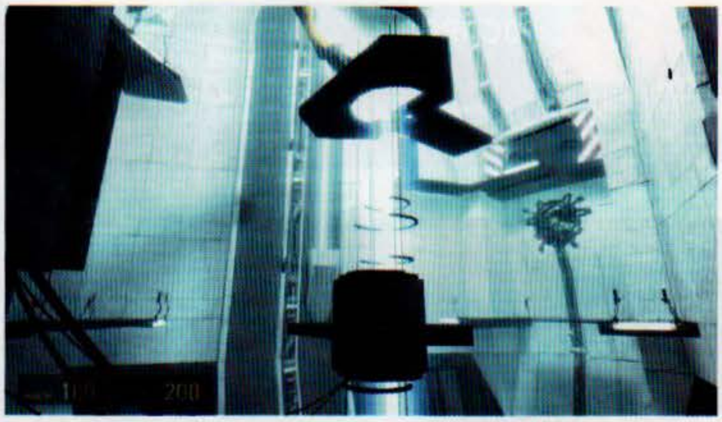


Nicknamed 'Zombines' by Alyx at your first encounter, *Episode One*'s most prominent addition to the *HL2* bestiary is its most deadly. Their hobbling gait can turn suddenly into a fast-paced, grenade-toting pursuit





The Citadel's critically unstable, deceptively tranquil power core, is shuttered away amid corridors lit by emergency power and flames. Its Stalker workmen slave to a Combine contingency plan that's only later revealed



condescension of Roger Ebert or his peers in more mature media. But in an interactive genre bound to the traditions of the pop-up gun and invisible hero, it simply doesn't get more sophisticated than this. That may sound disparaging, but consider it a compliment. To direct the eyes with this game's deftness, without the benefit of a fixed camera, is an achievement on a par with the most Oscar-worthy visions or the most Booker Prize-worthy prose. And it's far from the full extent of *Episode One*'s advancement.

Perhaps having recognised that the three most interesting characters in *Half-Life 2* – the Combine, the ever-watchful Dr Breen and City 17 itself – would hold a diminished appeal second time around, its successor has manoeuvred its cast to give the game a new personality – one better suited to its more action-packed chain of events. With Breen, Eli and the oblique G-Man essentially absent, save for minor contributions at the outset, this is very much Alyx Vance's time in the spotlight, under which she shines. Much of her strength as a partner – like the AI of the Combine – is illusory, born of a massive unseen health bar that can, for instance, survive the immediate blast of a grenade. But what an illusion it is.



Valve's use of technology is as industrious as ever: what Source provides, *Half-Life 2* continues to exploit. Lighting is a key gameplay device, as demonstrated above. What you don't pick out with your flashlight, Alyx can't shoot



The Citadel remains a focal point, but its magnetism has been reversed. The swirling vortex in the sky says it all

Congratulating your accuracy, alerting you to incoming grenades (and the cup runneth over with those) and siphoning off enemies before capably dispatching them, Alyx is something more than an ally – she's a companion. Beyond guiding both your footsteps and gaze to where the action is, she breathes humanity into a world where almost every other person you encounter is too shell-shocked to speak. Between the spells of chaos and calm, she proves herself capable yet vulnerable – another, most beguiling contrast. Her sympathies bathe the cold and browbeaten City 17 in a new light, which is something the game spends much of its overall energy achieving.

In a literal sense, the Source lighting system has been overhauled to dramatic effect, shooting auroral HDR blooms between the peaks of the city skyline, and tracing characters with aggressive yet precise crests of overbrightening. The fruits of the *Lost Coast* experiment have added a whole new strategic layer to *Half-Life 2*'s combat, whereby enemies can now cloak themselves in blinding glare. Again, this is more a testament to scripting and spawn placement than AI intuition. One boss battle, moreover, is a near-facsimile of *The Lost Coast*'s, albeit with a physics-heavy twist that joins many others in taking the game beyond what you expect.

But therein lies the only real issue to be had with *Episode One*: a vague sense of conflict in a game that could just as easily be considered episode two. It's a new beginning staged in a world where much is familiar, and structurally it feels like an inverted reprise – a retreat from the Citadel in more ways than one. This doesn't make it necessarily worse, only diminished in certain regards and better in others. Beginning with one catastrophe and ending with another, it also feels like quite a peculiar way to start a trilogy. But when speaking of a game that's blessed with its forebear's incomparable diligence, available at a steal and brilliant throughout, that's hardly disastrous. **[8]**



Evolved and newly-invented physics puzzles often meld with the interplay of Freeman and Alyx, resulting in hugely rewarding challenges that stir the game's set-piece-heavy formula

Gas leak



Its plot continues to provide more questions than answers, but *Half-Life 2* remains generous with the truths of its manufacture. In the spirit of Raising The Bar and recent Steam-delivered patches, *Episode One* takes every opportunity to show off the insight of its creators. Commentary nodes that trigger aural remarks about particular scenes and methods are scattered liberally throughout the five chapters, representing a record number of Valve employees. With the secrets of Source now common knowledge amongst fans, the revelations here focus on process rather than technology. The delivery is somewhat deadpan, but considering the abundant personality that's been invested in the game itself, it's a wonder the team has any left for itself.





LOCOROCO

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: £35 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SCEE DEVELOPER: SCEI
PREVIOUSLY IN: E162





Enemy encounters are rare, but when you do meet the liquoricey Mojas, you'll need to give them a quick thump or they'll nip a LocoRoco free from your bouncing bulk with their mean little teeth – and eat him

Head to toe, *LocoRoco* will make you sing. It will make your eyes sing, as its world's flat slices of light hum with colour. It will make your body sing, as it sways in time with the to-and-fro tilts needed to tip your wobbling blob from one end of the level to the other. It will make your brain sing, as it adjusts to the slingshots and switchbacks of the 2D physics. And it will make your mouth sing, unable to resist joining in with the shrill gibberish of the bubblegum-sweet soundtrack. Put simply, *LocoRoco* is a nursery rhyme you can play.

And, like a nursery rhyme, there's an unanswerable logic behind its defiantly nutty story. The universe needs repopulating with LocoRocos, who help keep the world in literal harmony with their continual songs. Starting with just one, lone Loco, you tilt the landscape, using only the L and R buttons, to roll him into every nook and cranny, looking for magic fruit. For every fruit eaten, the Loco can spawn a little clone, either bulking up his mass into one super-Loco or splitting off into a swarm of individuals whose small size lets them squeeze into the smallest corners. Reach the end, and you've

> Roll him up to the top of the hill, jump him in a puddle, right up to his middle, then tip him up and pour him out





There's not just getting larger and wobblier to deal with. This owl likes to suck you in, chew you up and spit you out a different shape. Sometimes handy for slotting into skinny switch puzzles, and sometimes annoying, the shape persists even if you split your LocoRoco into its constituent characters

re-colonised the world, ready to move onto the next. Along the way are obstacles, enemies and puzzles – and your only tool to defeat them is the jolt you can give the landscape by tapping both shoulder buttons at once, bouncing you into the air.

It's a simple premise, but there's no faulting the thoroughness with which it's exploited. There are eight themed worlds, each with five levels, and their attributes – ice slides, undulating digestive tracts, swaying flower platforms, cog wheels, plunge pools and tree vines – put your Loco through an assault course that would exhaust the hardiest children's character. Roll him up to the top of the hill, roll him down

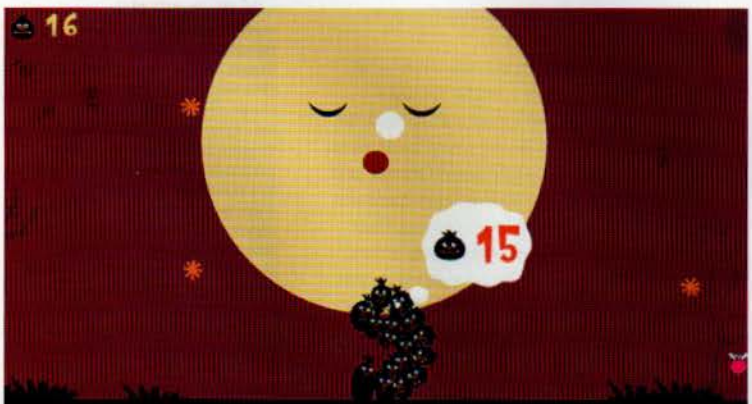


As the game progresses, more props are introduced to keep it fresh. Controlling both your LocoRoco and his beach ball just by tipping the landscape is an absorbing puzzle, and one ripe with opportunities for slapstick

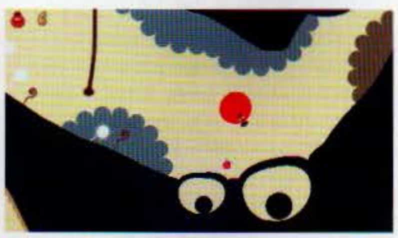
again, jump him in a puddle, right up to his middle, then tip him up and pour him out; split him up and send him crawling up the thinnest of spouts before putting him back together again – with the help, of course, of the circle button rather than the king's men and their horses.

But *LocoRoco's* charm and clarity leave it with a problem: the razored neatness of its environments promises a precision the controls can't provide. The Loco itself, round, deformable and prone to giving little hops and skips if left idle for more than a second or two, is a tough character to implement well into a platform game at the best of times – tougher still when you have no direct control over him. It produces an exhilarating, organic momentum as you squish, slide and splat through the easier levels, but during the more traditional platforming challenges of the later levels it becomes a fiddly frustration.

Nor is it a frustration the game has the structure to alleviate. Although you can finish most levels with any number of Locos,



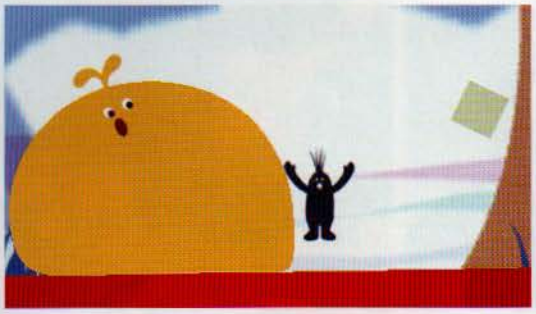
Some bonus sections – and bonus items – are only available if you've collected enough Loco. Why? Because to interact with things, the Locos must sing, and if there aren't enough of them they won't be loud enough







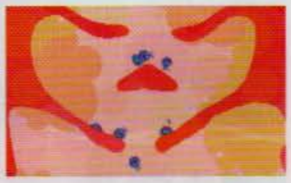




Throughout the game, you'll meet new LocoRoco friends, each with their own colour and facial tics. There's no gameplay implications over which you chose, but each has its own distinctive singing voice and a different theme tune to perform at significant moments in each of the levels

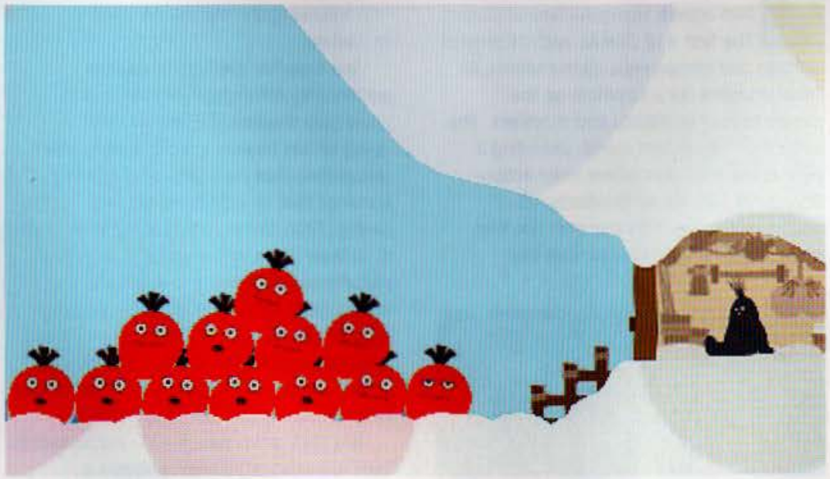






completing the game means finding all 19 fruit, maximising the size of your Loco. And, since there are no intermediate rewards, and as some levels feature one-way systems (meaning you can't backtrack if you realise you've reached the end and missed some fruit), you may find yourself trapped in an unrewarding slog of replaying levels over and over without any real sense of progress. These replays aren't helped by the fact that each world has its own theme, and that's the only tune that you'll hear while you play. It can't be changed and it can't be switched off, and – particularly through the PSP's tinny speakers – some will start to grate with surprising ferocity as you try and re-try a badly-calibrated jump.

But then this isn't a game whose atmosphere is designed to attract dogged completists. It's an atmosphere that encourages idle exploration, childlike wonder and forgiving affection. Played in that spirit, there's little doubt that Sony has pulled out a plum – and given the PSP its first real mascot in the process. **[7]**



Each level is packed with secrets – most hidden behind walls that look solid until you lean into them. This would feel like an unfair trick were it not for your LocoRoco's helpful habit of jiggling and winking in the direction of secrets



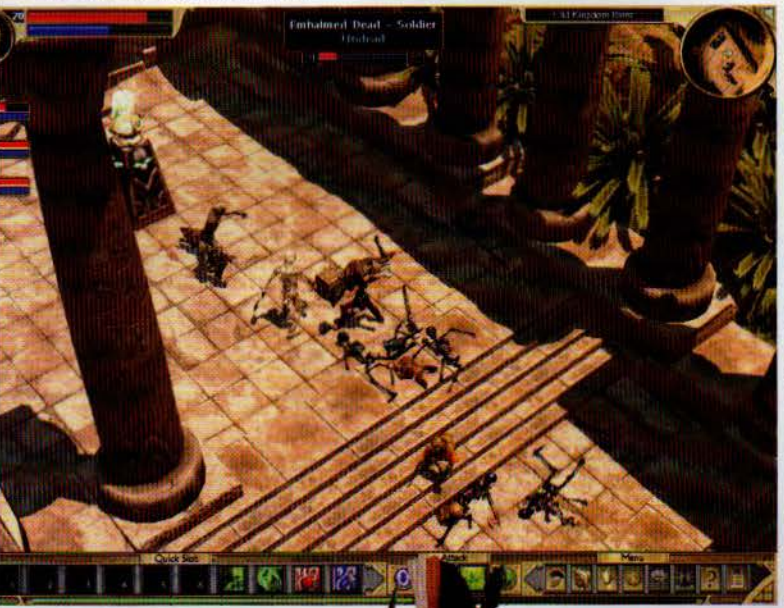
House music



LocoRocos don't just eat fruit; they also eat bugs. Found trailed around each level, these are in effect the game's currency, and can be spent on minigames which help you collect new props for your LocoRoco house. These props are also hidden throughout the levels – and given by grateful creatures – and there are hundreds to collect. Each house (bigger ones can be unlocked throughout the game) has a convenient gust of air, blowing your Locos up and into whatever assault course you have planned for them, with platforms, spinners, scales and steps. Sadly, a poorly-configured control scheme makes placing the parts an infuriating headache, and saps the fun out of what could only ever have been an idle distraction from the main game.



Titan Quest's class system continues the game's theme of being solid yet approachable, allowing you to choose two pools of skills from an available eight: magic, stealth, ranged and close combat can be mixed into a complimentary hybrid







The age's great cities are spectacularly represented, but exploration is tightly enclosed, reducing them – typically for the genre – down to a jog from portal to merchant and back





Boss fights are hit-and-miss, no pun intended, with the setup that makes one thrilling often turning the next into a war of attrition. The game is forgiving if you die, with no loss of items or experience, but your patience can still be stretched by the trudge back from a respawn point

Hunters and collectors



The item modification system is a satisfying one, providing a vast arrangement of claws, fleeces and less pleasant portions to be liberated from slain monsters, and relics of gods and heroes to be reassembled from fragments and installed in your equipment. Greece, Egypt and the Orient each have their own unique upgrades, with relics also supplying stealth edutainment: concise text details their owner's accomplishments and significance to explain the modifiers they provide.



TITAN QUEST

FORMAT: PC PRICE: £35
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: THQ
DEVELOPER: IRON LORE PREVIOUSLY IN: E156

Titan Quest draws its traditions from two equally rigorous classical studies. The first is of *Diablo*, with its cycle of carnage and conspicuous consumerism, of visual placebos for a scramble up the spreadsheet of attributes and modifiers. The other is of the ancient world, providing a layer of identification where most action-RPGs have only weary familiarity: it's understood without mouse-over tips that iron is stronger than copper, that the Spartans are warriors without equal, and that following the Nile inland will bring you to Thebes.

Iron Lore has pitched for a wider audience by refraining from the genre's usual pulp shadow and splatter, and in doing so has created a more mature game, recognising that dark fantasy can fail to convince that its worlds are actually worth saving. *Titan Quest*'s mythical hyper-realism is, at least when above ground, dazzlingly picturesque, with lighting so natural you expect there to be an elemental resistance for sunburn – and so to come upon Athens besieged, or the Han Emperor's terracotta armies run riot in Chang'an, provides pathos long before a quest voiceover kicks in.



Outdoor areas' constant movement, light and life is astonishing, with Egypt in particular rendered not just as baking wastes, but mirror pools and verdant floodplains. The visuals retain, even build on, their detail as you zoom in, but only the widest view is practical to play the game

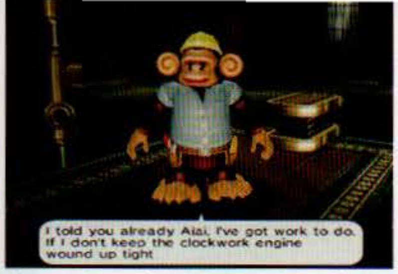
But aside from the visuals – not to belittle their towering production values – it becomes increasingly apparent that *Diablo*, not the mythical world, is the most prominent influence. Compared to the three cultures' worth of legends referenced on your travels, your own deeds are never more profound than killing a series of monsters, and never more varied than whether the slog through their life-bar is up close or at range. While your foes change across continents, their tactics remain identical: always favouring a berserk mob rush, and their use of player skills tending to repeat only the most damaging attacks (arguably a fair approximation of human play style).

Never ruinously hollow, it's more noticeable when the game is in closer confines and can't disguise its areas as anything more than a room-by-room dungeon crawl, itself a part of antiquity. It's almost an unfair criticism, as the sense of time and place infuses the game more than might have been expected – but such a confident, resonant world demands more to accomplish within it. That could fall to *Titan Quest*'s players, whether in a system built solely, and bravely, for co-operative multiplayer, or with the magnanimous inclusion of the game's editing tools to create new content.

Or it could fall to the industry: if *Titan Quest* was created in response to *Diablo*'s mechanics, perhaps some future title will be built in response to *Titan Quest*'s world – *our* world – and the many untapped stories it still has to tell. **[7]**



Visually, *SMBA* doesn't have the eye-popping colour, or the speed and solidity, of the original, but it's attractive and original, with themes – like Moonhaven's Victorian clockwork or Zootopia's robot theme park gone wrong – that steer clear of clichés



The game's themes of reconciliation, and its steadfast avoidance of violence as a solution, are admirable and rather sweet. But unfortunately the script lacks the snap and humour to stop it feeling saccharine, and the excuses given for AiAi's permanent servitude feel empty



SUPER MONKEY BALL ADVENTURE

FORMAT: GC, PS2 (VERSION TESTED), PSP PRICE: £30 RELEASE: OUT NOW. PUBLISHER: SEGA DEVELOPER: TRAVELLER'S TALES PREVIOUSLY IN: E162

At first – based on little more than hearing the title – *Super Monkey Ball Adventure* sounded like a dire misconception. Then the game revealed its pure platforming heart, its lack of combat, its locations that seemed conceived with a little more imagination than your average collect-em-up cliché, and hope swelled that it might deliver a sweet-natured, easygoing, child-friendly offshoot that still stayed true to the spirit of Sega's mad minimalist classic. In the end, the sad truth is that Traveller's Tales' adaptation is let down by so many small failures of design and execution that you begin to suspect that if it had been a little less faithful and little more bland, it might actually have been a more bearable game.

Super Monkey Ball Adventure has the standard sprawling structure of a platform adventure: AiAi (or Baby, MeeMee or GonGon) must travel across five large monkey kingdoms, performing varied feats for frustrated citizens in the *Mario Sunshine* mode, in order to raise happiness and unite the fractured society behind a wedding uniting two rival clans. The problem arises when you unite this style of game – usually a safe and amiable amble until latter stages at least – with the intense, focused demands of skilled platforming. That requires balance, design rigour, and technical finesse on a tremendous scale, and that seems to be beyond Traveller's Tales' abilities.

It's just too hard, the physics too capricious, and the tasks too frustrating for words. Although there are no lives, you can still fall out of the world as you could in the original *Monkey Ball* – and if you do, a task must be started from scratch, no matter how many of its elements have been completed. Attempts at variety have led to awfully inappropriate cross-breeding (even, yes, with stealth). The level design is often attractive and imaginative, but unrefined, unforgiving and poorly signposted – and the pacing and balancing is haphazard, to say the least. Moonhaven, the spectacular clockwork flying city, should have made a thrilling late climax, but instead it's a brick wall of difficulty that appears just a couple of hours into the game.

There are things to admire: the spell-activated power-ups that modify your ball (allowing you to inflate it, float it on water, make it sticky with suction-cups, and so on) are mostly fitting and well-implemented. The determination to bring every aspect of *Monkey Ball* under one roof – with levels in the classic style being used to unlock new areas, and Monkey Target-style flight sections – is impressive, and the availability of the classic levels in a standalone, traditional Challenge mode is welcome. But *Super Monkey Ball Adventure* ultimately doesn't offer the rewarding feel or inherent entertainment it would need to make up for its exhaustingly precarious, enervating tone, and it's hard to imagine either young players or old fans having any patience with it. **[4]**



The minigame suite is weak: Fight, Race and Target are still diverting, if diluted, but the three new games are poor. It's fair enough to have to buy each with bananas collected in the main game, but forcing you to buy individual stages for them is a step too far



Monkey Ball Adventure's surprisingly detailed approach to the *Monkey Ball* mythos extends to using the silly spell from the second game as the basis for its power-up chant system. The monkeys' speech is similar babyish nonsense





Load times between areas are masked with horribly misguided and maddeningly dull 'spinner gates' that must be pushed round ten times before you can move on. It's like being asked to manually turn the DVD in the drive

Tilts and tumbles



Not even Amusement Vision's own designers managed to match the condensed, sadistic brilliance of the level design in the first *Monkey Ball*, so it would be unreasonable to expect Traveller's Tales to: in fact, they make a decent fist of their classic 'puzzle' levels. They are at least in the pure spirit of the original rather than the gimmicks of its sequel, and feature some cunning and dastardly ideas; but they aren't quite as finely-crafted or contained, they don't encourage experiment to the same degree, and they swing too wildly between the extreme poles of difficulty. The challenge mode has a basically similar structure to the original games but is half-broken by the lack of warp gates or banana-dispensing bonus levels.



FORBIDDEN SIREN 2

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: £40 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SCEE DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE (SCEI)
PREVIOUSLY IN: E161

Hit and run



Completing the two most accessible endings unlocks a Hard difficulty (possibly more penalty than reward), as well as another subversive twist, the ability to replay missions as surprisingly tight time trials – with a bonus for never using your remote viewing ability. A score attack mission featuring a returning face from the first game – who has obviously been pushed too far – hints at the style the other, inevitable unlockables will follow.

Most cult successes attract their following, but the first *Siren* bullied itself one. Survival in its survival horror seemed so remote, the broken timeline so dismembered, that it was only a few electrodes on your DualShock away from being a psychological laboratory test.

The elements that won it grudging admiration return in the sequel, including a fractured narrative, a diverse cast of disarmingly frail characters and an utterly pitiless atmosphere – this time produced by the unwelcoming concrete of a postwar Japanese island community, and a call of the sea that's hungry and primal. Remaining uniquely unkind to its cast, *Siren 2* is more sympathetic to its players: upping the once-ponderous speed of its stealth creep and interface, and easing the demands of replay. It even offers an Easy difficulty, as much as any scenario where a defenceless character is hunted by a vicious mob could be described as easy.

That mortal hide-and-seek is still where much of the game's horror, and at times frustration, is drawn from. But as it jumps from moment to moment, roles regularly switch from hunted to hunter – a sense of contrast befitting a game that spurns screen furniture, but requires regular visits to a front end with the graphic design of a car parts manual. Combat doesn't have *Resident Evil 4*'s finality – not least because enemies can only be beaten back, not blown apart – but it can work to colour the game's shifting tone, from desperation to premeditation to sheer hateful excess.

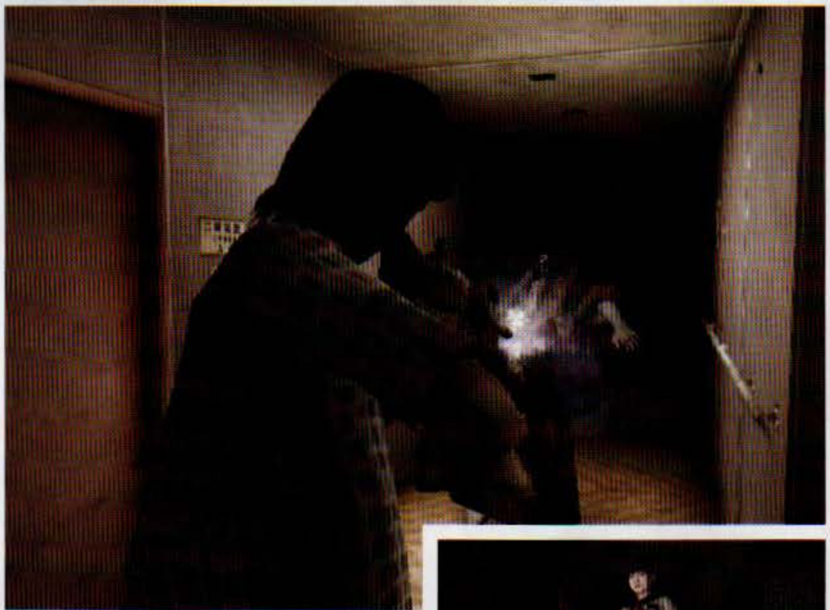
Such constant reinvention isn't always successful, however, and the lulls expose the arbitrary nature of *Siren 2*'s plotting: it's an unreliable narrator, respecting or ignoring actions made earlier in the timeline on its own whims. And those actions are still a scavenger hunt directed by game prompts rather than reason – making sense when viewed with hindsight, if at all. Uncovering a story in reverse is much of *Siren 2*'s draw, though, otherwise spending so much effort to keep characters alive only so they can meet fates worse than death would be too masochistic. It's a forensic investigation, with as much of the story to be uncovered sifting through an archive as in tracing the cast's last steps, and in questioning how many of the intentional blanks you really want to fill.

Where *Siren 2*'s best moments of in-game design and meta-game setup coincide, and you enter a mission as a leap of faithlessness – expecting the worst, but you still have to know – the experience that follows is like nothing else gaming has ever achieved. And that might just come as a relief. **[7]**





Characters are extensively motion-captured, with memorable quirks. The original Japanese voice track is included – a little less theatrical than the English dub, and far more fitting



Guns feel unexpectedly competent in the hands of those who know how to use them, and firstperson aim (barring deadzones) is solid. You can go into firstperson at any time, and it's an effective use of the perspective, taping the camera to the head of an already well-articulated thirdperson model



***Siren* continues to have no qualms about threatening teenage, or even pre-school, characters – or turning them against each other. The dual structure, in which repeated sections provide another conclusion, makes each moment of rescue or trust seem a fake-out for something darker**



Meleé combat has the motion and improvised weapons to be brutal, but not enough sense of connection to prevent button-mashing. Given enemies' dogged regeneration and unlimited ammunition, you'll still want to beat them down any chance you get





The dark underbelly of *Steambot's* world crawls with gangs of ne'er-do-wells who can either be defeated in the cause of justice or helped to wreak havoc on citizens



STEAMBOT CHRONICLES

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: $50 (£27) RELEASE: OUT NOW (US) TBA (UK)
PUBLISHER: ATLUS DEVELOPER: IREM



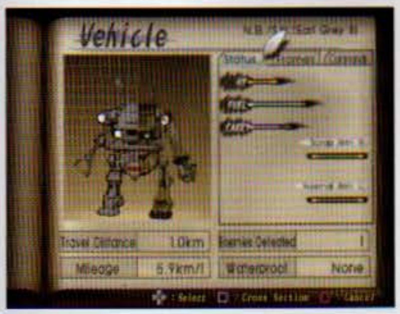
Because of his trauma-inspired amnesia, Vanilla's interactions with the locals are left to the player's whim with each dialogue sequence offering choices from courteous to offensive which colour his status in the world



In contrast to the quiet lull of the rest of the game, Trotmobile battles both in the field and in arenas are raucous – the twin-stick-controlled mechs effortlessly dashing and attacking with customisable weapons







Each Trotmobile is comprised of various frames corresponding to body parts, which can be purchased throughout the world, or developed for upgraded attack and defensive properties. Special frames can be equipped to ferry passengers around the world or to collect resources to sell in areas where they're most needed

If you set out to look for the fundamental differences between the east and west's respective approaches to non-linear gaming in *Steambot Chronicles*, the answer hits you the minute your steampunk Trotmobile first sets foot in its first village. Where the west might allow you to charge through town with wicked and reckless abandon, *Steambot*, in contrast, strips the player of control entirely beyond choosing destination points, with the resulting trip acted-out in turn, your mech staying meticulously aligned with road lanes, making all necessary stops at traffic lights and coming to a gentle stop perfectly atop its marked spot.

It's that essential politeness that permeates every moment of the game, even when you lead its amnesiac hero Vanilla down the path to villainy. Its main quest involves Vanilla's travels throughout the world onboard your fully-customisable vehicle, offing bandits in the wilderness between each gated community and lending help however necessary to its welcoming cast, both good and evil. But its voluminous amount of side-quests and diversions, the real meat of the game – raw materials trading, regional billiards championships and arena battles, randomly-generated dungeon crawling, fossil excavation, odd jobs and even dating – are politely tucked below the surface of its main quest: there for you if you choose to seek them, but unobtrusively obscured for you to freely ignore. That near-infinitesimal attention to detail Irem has put into crafting its world, perhaps further evidence of the east-west divide, is also evident in its populace. Where other free-roaming games of its type might use town citizens as a featureless meandering backdrop, instead nearly every member of *Steambot's* hoi polloi fits into the world's well-oiled machinery in their own distinct way, even if just to serve as counterpoint to another person's flippant aside.

The greatest challenge of non-linearity is in maintaining consistent focus and purpose, and though there's rarely any real doubt which tasks will advance its plotline, the freedom that it otherwise provides can ultimately leave you spoiled for choice. Contrasted with the urgency of the requests of its central quest, players are left with the allure of exploration largely tainted with an underlying gnawing sense of needless dawdling. And though the game prides itself on its relaxed pace, the above-mentioned hands-off approach to in-town movement combined with necessary back and forth treks from one village to the next means that impatience is only ever one accepted quest away and little of importance can be accomplished in a short amount of time.

In the end, despite the adventurous underpinnings of its storyline, the game works best approached as a leisurely long-term investment. Seeing only its main quest through is less than half its reward, and attempting to race beyond its own predetermined speed limits only results in frustration, but given the time to slow-burn and settle in at its own tempo the immensity of its offerings will rarely disappoint. **[7]**

Jam with the band



Easily the best of *Steambot's* mini-tasks comes from joining travelling band Garland Globetrotters. Initially limited to harmonica accompaniment, throughout the course of his adventures Vanilla can acquire additional instruments to perform with the band to earn extra money and accolades. Each instrument has its own unique control method, variously combining analogue stick twirls and button presses and, though they can be somewhat loose on timing, they come together to comprise a surprisingly accomplished minigame



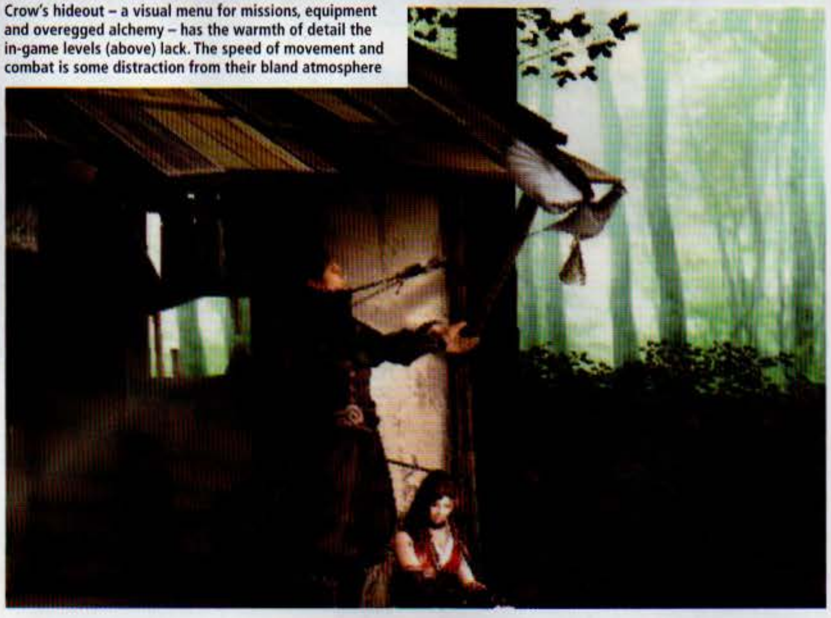
Apart from Crow, characters seem low-key for Acquire – until the conflict attracts three rival ninja clans, their footsoldiers complicating missions and their leaders issuing lethal duels





When a warlord's samurai generals become vulnerable, a flurry of missions to assassinate or protect them follow – in a practical, but dishonourable twist, you can sign on for guard duty then 'accidentally' slay them

Crow's hideout – a visual menu for missions, equipment and overegged alchemy – has the warmth of detail the in-game levels (above) lack. The speed of movement and combat is some distraction from their bland atmosphere





SHINOBIDO: WAY OF THE NINJA

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: £30 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SCEE (UK) DEVELOPER: ACQUIRE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E147, E164

Ninja garden



Crow's hideout features an editable walled garden: first used as a training ground, it quickly becomes a battlefield once he begins making enemies, who launch smash-and-grab raids between missions. Finding the perfect balance between Shinto tranquillity and deathtraps can be compelling, and provides practice for the game's full mission editor. As with *Tenchu 1*, the Japanese fan-mission community's torturous best has been immortalised in a Japan-only expansion, *Shinobido Takumi*.

Acquire, once the house of *Tenchu*, has distanced itself from its lost franchise with the *Way Of The Samurai* games' trials in branching structure. And yet it's obviously been keenly aware of *Tenchu*'s failure to find a second wind on the second PlayStation, driving this somewhat belated return with as spiritual a successor as copyright can allow.

Though hero Crow has a fixed storyline of his own to follow, that story bookends a looser tale of three warlords' conflict for control of his province. You're free to throw in with any of the trio, with continued faithful service offering missions of greater importance, difficulty and reward: but provided Crow goes unseen in action, his other patrons will be unaware of his shifting loyalties, allowing you to play for all sides while setting them against each other.

It's a set-up no less satisfying for its simplicity of presentation, although the same can't be said for *Shinobido*'s levels. Simply blank boards for pieces to be arranged on – hosting objectives from foraging to postage, kidnap to assassination – they can prove forgettable before you've actually finished a mission set in one. Thankfully, Crow is from the action-game school of ninja, a force of wall-running, somersaulting motion with little time for sightseeing. A button-tap launches a headlong sprint that can be used for the feudal equivalent of a drive-by assassination, or combined with jumps to clear rooftops in a thrilling clatter of tiles.

A physics model provides the barreling momentum, and also encourages you to tip and throw objects to your advantage, but their inertia can be unpredictable – the grappling line launching Crow over a balcony and into the lap of the watchman he was stalking, or a vital item horrifyingly rolling off a cliff at the slightest upset. It's a problem compounded by the riot scenes that ensue upon discovery, producing dozens of men desperately attacking Crow, each other and the scenery to an extent that neither the game's clockwork methodology nor its engine can necessarily recover from.

For all its advances and avenues for experimentation, it can seem that the most practical way to play *Shinobido* is with exactly the same overcautious creep as *Tenchu*, other than cutting downtime with a sprint between targets. Endearing despite its flaws, it's not so much the way of the ninja in itself, but an indication of the way the ninja game can retain its relevancy: if a sequel can find the proper production support next generation, *Shinobido* could become the game that its developers and players deserve. **[6]**



Stealth kills remain a highlight, snagging an enemy's ankle from a ledge or (above) impaling a target through a screen door are particularly satisfying. Setting up exotic kills is made more fraught by a familiar fuzziness that can send Crow tumbling rather than actually grabbing a ledge





The three classes of car – Derby, Racing and Street – follow the standard path from slow and tough to fast and fragile. Unusually, the game's banger-racing aesthetic and superior dirt-track handling make the lowliest the more compelling, and later stages suit the game's chop-shop charm less well



FLATOUT 2

FORMAT: PC, PS2, XBOX (VERSION TESTED) PRICE: £35 RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: EMPIRE INTERACTIVE DEVELOPER: BUGBEAR PREVIOUSLY IN: E161

FlatOut 2 is a testament to the homogenising power of market forces. This formerly scruffy stock-car racer now shimmers beneath a presentational oil slick siphoned straight from the hold of the EA supertanker. Loading screens detail the pointless backstories of airbrushed 20-something rivals; in-race events and achievements are shouted in fierce italicised orange; dialogue boxes pop up to tell you which Nickelback song is currently playing. From the soundtrack's hard-rock bluster to the cornfields, storm drains and downtown skyscrapers of the locations, *FlatOut* has been plucked out of the Finnish mud and landed straight in the middle-American heartland.

But what about the game underneath? Has the free spirit of the original – rambling, tyre-toppling, physical dirt-track racing without borders – been trampled underfoot in the march to marketability? The answer is yes, but not entirely, and nor is it completely a bad thing. It's still a straightforward, knockabout racer enlivened by large run-off areas, destructible bangers and piles of debris at every corner that, when scattered across the track, stay there; but this concept has been streamlined and conventionally redirected. The tracks are far more detailed and dramatic, and arguably more entertaining, but they're also more staged, with an abundance of solid borders to scrape against, and the open space carefully organised around shortcuts and an occasional wide apron of multiple-choice chaos. It's not freedom, but it feels a little like it, and it is better, more focused design.

What's become of the game's highly evolved physics and persistent dynamic debris is more of a double-edged sword. There is a huge amount of destructible scenery (matching *Full Auto* on 360 with ease). Rocks, however, seem to be made of polystyrene, aircraft engines bounce like beach balls and anything less than a telephone box won't meaningfully slow you down. It may still be far from the weightless balsa-wood props of most other racers, but it doesn't seriously punish, and it's hard to use creatively to punish others. It's mostly for show (and along with jumps and crashes, for building your nitrous reserves), shifting the competitive emphasis firmly onto car-on-car contact, *Burnout: Takedown* style.

Where *FlatOut* felt like racing in a field, *FlatOut 2* feels like racing on a film set. It has been reshaped into the archetypal, competent arcade racer – a genre now composed almost exclusively of competent archetypes, all in the thrall of Criterion's trailblazing series. It's not much closer to *Burnout*'s unnaturally perfect risk-reward balance than its rivals, although it is still distinguished by challenging difficulty and pithy, weighty, surprisingly realistic handling. It's a solid game, but at the cost of seeing another wayward entertainer straighten up its act and join the ranks of the dedicated followers of fashion. **[6]**



Aggressive, unpredictable driver AI is a vital strength of *FlatOut 2*; singleplayer just wouldn't have been fun without it. However, despite a sensible instant reset button and balanced nitro rewards, the game's chaotic nature can make progress frustratingly difficult, and the weak upgrades don't help



FlatOut's engine was always good, and it's all the more so now that the robust handling and physics are accompanied by lavish visuals. Improved art direction can take a lot of the credit, with locales like the down-home American farmstead drenched in colour



Ragtime band



FlatOut's cheekily gruesome ragdoll olympics – essentially a series of golf-style minigames in which the car is the club and its driver the ball – were an irreverent, throwaway hit, so it's no surprise that they return, euphemistically termed 'stunts'. Unfortunately, the sumptuous setting and expanded range of challenges they're given this time around feel like overkill for such a silly, slender concept (drive, set angle, laugh). The new aerobatic aftertouch is minimal, and most new challenges require more precision than most players will be bothered to muster, although 'stone skipping' is a joy. A decent set of high-concept special event racetracks – ovals and figures of eight, mostly – and free-for-all destruction derbies round out the extras package.



RISE & FALL: CIVILIZATIONS AT WAR

FORMAT: PC **PRICE:** £35 **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: MIDWAY **PREVIOUSLY IN:** E151, E153
DEVELOPER: STAINLESS STEEL STUDIOS/IN-HOUSE

When we last looked at *Rise & Fall*, we concluded that its appealing premise – of an RTS which let you zoom in to the level of an action game – was poorly served by Stainless' rather inept implementation. Midway clearly shared that opinion, and refused to accept the game the studio delivered, triggering Stainless' demise and many months of internal remedial work. The result is a slicker, stronger game, but one which still falls short of its aims.

The strategy side is tolerably well handled: while not wandering too far from Westwood's ageing template, it boasts a slimline resource-gathering model, intelligent troop controls and a particular flair for naval combat. Drop in to the sandals of your hero, either as leader of an army or lone commando, and you're granted a rudimentary handful of troop commands and physical attacks which provide both precise control and a more visceral involvement with the action on the battlefield.

As might be expected, it's not a perfect combination, but the problem here is largely one of pacing, with a jarring disconnection between the unsophisticated flail of the hands-on combat and the more carefully measured tactics of the bigger picture. While this is certainly not the place for elaborate combo moves, it was over-optimistic to expect just three attacks and one block to adequately carry protracted, finger-cramping – and unavoidable – fight sequences.



Sea battles are *Rise And Fall*'s greatest single triumph. Vessels can generate their own forces, making them much more than mere water-borne artillery. Grappling and boarding enemy ships, or simply splitting them in half, is a delight to watch

It was also a little optimistic to push the engine into cutscene duties. While it capabably renders the battlefield at any distance, it suffers when inspected at close range for prolonged periods. Coupled to an inexpensive cast and script, the results are low resolution and high camp. Admittedly, such flamboyance is part of *Rise & Fall*'s charm: seeing your foes sent flying as their ship is sliced in half, or lost to a cloud of blood as you flail at them in the arena adds a sense of spectacle to what could otherwise be rather po-faced material.

Yet despite this, it's hard not to take *Rise & Fall* seriously. It isn't perfectly realised, but the subtleties of tactical planning and the bloodiness of frontline slashing combine to suggest a new way forward for realtime strategy. Rarely have game heroes felt so heroic, and combined with the scope at which the genre excels, it's an alluring prospect for the future. **[6]**



The developers would have done well to halt their borrowings from Gladiator at the soundtrack. The arena level, though good looking, outstays its welcome, showing up the unsophisticated combat and crude sound effects



JAWS UNLEASHED

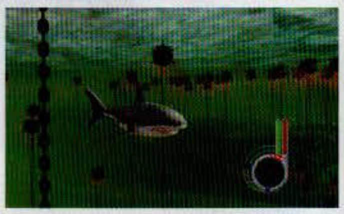
FORMAT: PS2, XBOX (VERSION TESTED) **PRICE:** $30 (£16)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), JULY 21 (UK) **PUBLISHER:** MAJESCO
DEVELOPER: APPALOOSA INTERACTIVE



Atop the waves, there's little in *Unleashed* that won't act up when scrutinised. Beach-dwellers run back and forth like an 8bit loading screen, penned by invisible walls and their habit of teleporting down the shore

Those who believe Jaws' comedic potential to have peaked with the Aussie-accented Michael Caine should perhaps take a moment to sit down. Amity Island's latest scourge, here called Jaws even though he wasn't in the films, holds more than just a grudge. Its belly, for instance, hankers for all manner of edibles hidden throughout this belated game, from tin cans to number plates and treasure chests. Previously unadvertised juggling skills come as a surprise, as does the ability to spit waterborne objects over a hundred metres through the air and belly-flop surface vessels like a maritime Mario. Missions then apply these talents to such improbable acts of Luddism – you can devastate three oil rigs in fifteen minutes – that some extraordinary backstory yearns to be told. Perhaps the shark is pro-Greenpeace, or ex-CIA. Sadly, we never find out.

Majesco's recent troubles – symptoms of which include the abortion of *Taxi Driver*, and the sale of *Ghost Rider* and *The Darkness* – have left their mark on a vaguely likeable, chucklesome adventure. Its sandbox ocean, split into several of Amity's surrounding regions, teems with life of multiform shape and colour, modelled in every instance with naturalism and care. The effort invested in the shark's own manufacture has created a lithe and almost hypnotic beast, capable of turning grace into savagery with a trigger-controlled chomp. It says much for the game we could have seen, had Appaloosa's development time not so evidently been curtailed by circumstance.





The much publicised dismemberment engine claims to facilitate over 25 amputations; in humans, at least, we only observed about six of note. Waggling tourists about until a limb pops off in a crimson cloud, however, is endless fun

Perhaps then we'd have enjoyed a full suite of voice samples, rather than a scant few played back at different pitches. Perhaps, with proper QA, it wouldn't have been so easy to wedge yourself in inescapable places, or fall foul of a malfunctioning camera that finds even passing from above to below the water troubling. In fact, with the exceptions of deplorably bad cutscenes and haphazard signposting, there are few significant flaws here that a steadier gestation couldn't have resolved. Particularly, it brings an entrancing, *Ecco*-esque stoicism to its world that even a temperamental framerate, cacophonous (though faithful) score, and myriad glitches find hard to disrupt. **[4]**



TENCHU: TIME OF THE ASSASSINS

FORMAT: PSP **PRICE:** £35 **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SEGA **DEVELOPER:** FROM SOFTWARE





The mission editor is a highlight, a well-implemented piece of technology that makes the game's awful draw distance seem even more befuddling. The Japanese release has prompted the appearance of sites dedicated to the sharing of maps, although it's not clear if such downloads will be region-free

A lot has happened to the stealth genre since *Tenchu's* PlayStation inception, most notably its saturation and relentless cameo appearances in other gaming categories, but also its solid growth and refinement en route. The series itself has long been overtaken by a number of franchises, but it's one that retains its own particular groove of gratuitous stealth kills, even if that groove can sometimes feel like a rut, gummed up by sticky controls.

In one way, *Time Of The Assassins* is very much trapped in the dark ages, featuring a dismal draw-distance that's a throwback to the earliest *Tenchu* titles. Peep around a corner into a room that's of moderate size and its furthest walls are lost in the gloom, a fog of war that turns line-of-sight enemy detection into a literal blind alley. It doesn't break the game: an on-screen meter helps the player feel out nearby enemies well enough, but there's that vital element of satisfaction – of visually tracking a target – that's completely absent, leaving the signature silent slays to provide fulfilment. Elsewhere, however, things look better, thanks to detailed characters and smooth animation that's only tainted by the stealth crouch, which allows movement in a limited number of directions.

But then there's the scrappy camera system that, when coupled with the pitch-black periphery of the player's vision, makes the virgin voyage through each stage feel frustratingly awkward when compared to subsequent, more graceful replays. Those missions are typically slim PSP-sized bites, thankfully, and take in four whole storylines (plus a bonus unlockable fifth).

While *Tenchu* hasn't moved on, it has moved out – stocking a splendid amount of content. An amiable, option-rich mission editor, co-op and versus possibilities, and a roster of over two-dozen hidden characters that can be accessed for unlocked missions via freeplay. *Time Of The Assassins* may be clumsy, but it's still a formula that can engage if approached correctly – it's the very definition of a fan-centric product, an instalment best enjoyed by those with the experience to overcome its flaws, and the persistence to savour its breadth. **[5]**



FMV sequences are of high quality, albeit with a dub that has some awful lip synch. Voice acting is bearable, but subtitled Japanese dialogue as well as the English seems too much to ask of a UMD



MAGNETICA

FORMAT: DS **PRICE:** $30 (£16) **RELEASE:** OUT NOW (US, JP)
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO **DEVELOPER:** MITCHELL

There's a razor-thin line that separates remake, revival and ripoff, and that tense tightrope walk is one that's been heightening for the past few years between Mitchell, creators of late '90s arcade underdog *Puzz Loop*, and PopCap, reigning kings of the casual, and their multi-platform success *Zuma*. Play both back-to-back and the similarities are unmistakable to even the most inattentive, and the five or so year difference in copyright notices tell all the story that needs to be told. *Magnetica*, then, can be read as Mitchell continuing its partnership with Nintendo first struck with *Polarium*, and reasserting itself on the gaming landcape with an updated and enhanced version of its original IP.

Like *Polarium*, *Magnetica* sticks to cool minimalist essentials in its presentation, stripping all the thematic pretensions later added by its imitator, but maintains its original frenetic gameplay, with necessary concessions made to its platform. Using the stylus to grab and flick the playable marble toward its target is a refreshingly intuitive and surprisingly accurate addition that keeps the pace consistently hurried, versus the fine-tuned turn and point of the past, and Mitchell carries the ideas further in its multiplayer mode with screen obscuring ion-cloud attacks that can be blown away by the player with the DS's microphone.

Despite the obvious staying power of the game's mechanics that has made it a hit in all its various iterations, it strains to push itself beyond its one-note colour-matching principle and into truly engaging puzzling. Though it exemplifies the instant accessibility and quick-burst satisfaction of its Touch Generations categorisation, even with its varied game modes it's at a decided disadvantage without offering quite enough variety or reward to set it clearly above its budget-priced competitor. And this, unfortunately, might be its most frustrating downfall – that, nearly a decade on and despite how cleverly it tries, it simply hasn't been able to revolutionise its own formula sufficiently to fully reclaim its identity from its doppelganger. **[6]**



Magnetica offers a predictable set of game modes to flesh itself out: Challenge is its longer-playing marathon mode, Quest sees a larger set of more creatively designed short-play boards and Puzzle brings a cerebral diversion to clear a string with a pre-selected stock of marbles



Magnetica has a slender number of truly unique additions. For example, sinking a marble into one of the board's corner pockets spins the top screen's fruit-machine-like tumblers for a chance at getting one of the game's power-ups. These have the useful ability to stop or slow time, or even to remove all balls of a single colour from the advancing chain





ASTONISHIA STORY

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: £30 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: UBISOFT DEVELOPER: SONNORI

The fact that Sonnori's 12-year-old adventure plays like a JRPG parody (anime character montages, stolen artefacts and the sheer cheek of having the hero asleep at the opening) is the least of its worries – its failings run much deeper.

Sprites performing charming pantomimes and incidental touches of humour are scant consolation for *Astonishia*'s dismissive attitude toward characterisation. Disregarding some particularly incongruous and unintentionally amusing dialogue, meaningful character development is practically non-existent, with members of your party flitting in and out of your force with depressing regularity – leaving you with a superficial attachment to all but the story's main hero.

It's a problem that extends to the battle system, too. Being a near carbon copy of the *Shining Force* system – albeit initiated through a combination of visible overworld enemies and random encounters – means that there's plenty of potential there, but the absence of any real character or skill diversity and the lack of consistent party members means that strategy is almost redundant. Likewise, enemies are lacking in variation – and those you face seem curiously predisposed to concentrate their attacks on either the weakest in the field or the main hero – knowledge of which, much as in *Shining Force*, can be used to your advantage, often cheapening encounters.



Astonishia's 'leave-no-stone-unturned' approach to exploration is exhausting. Every house, town and NPC needs to be thoroughly investigated, often multiple times, in order to progress – usually through means you least expected

Perhaps its most irritating flaw however, is a lack of attention to its own plot – impacting not only on how you engage with the story, but also on your overall progress. Fetch and carry quests are a compulsory distraction that give you little to genuinely care about, and the constant to-ing and fro-ing serves only to make you impatient for something, *anything*, of note to help sustain your interest.

Things are confounded further through poor signposting and unfocused design that can often leave you feeling lost. Avenues that look as though they offer a way forward do not, while the solutions for furthering proceedings can often prove maddeningly inconspicuous – you suspect that progress is more a case of good fortune than anything else.

Astonishia ultimately proves to be little more than a charming catalogue of decade-old foibles and cliché. Western publishers, it seems, have yet to successfully plunder Korea's hidden treasures. **[4]**



So bad it's good or often just plain odd – _Astonishia_ does, often unintentionally, have a sense of humour. And there's a rare self-awareness there that, briefly, will crack a smile long after you've given up hope



MICRO MACHINES V4

FORMAT: DS, PC, PS2 (VERSION TESTED), PSP PRICE: £30
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: CODEMASTERS
DEVELOPER: SUPERSONIC SOFTWARE PREVIOUSLY IN: E163









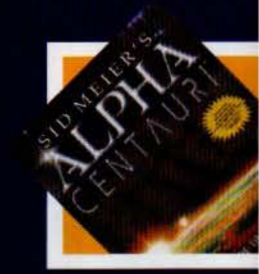
The collectable machines themselves, while possessed of a certain cute chunkiness, are so astonishingly basic visually they're impossible to covet beyond retentive completism. The game's dated looks may be a result of being developed across four very disparate platforms

The *V4* suffix is Codemasters' way of denying all knowledge of 2002's Atari-published version of *Micro Machines*, and taking repossession of its classically manic top-down toy racing franchise for the first time since *V3*, eight long years and at least one hardware generation ago. But it hasn't ignored *Micro Machines*' spiritual successor, the blunt and brilliant *Mashed*, hiring that game's developers for this one and integrating its power-up weapon system. Strangely though, Supersonic seems more concerned with doing justice to the faded tenets of an all-but-defunct toy licence than with besting its own high-water mark in this micro-genre.

The cheerfully prosaic racing arenas – pool table, flowerbed, classroom, attic – return, this time with a little light physics acting on the obstacles, and a few dynamic hazards like hairdryers and buzzsaws thrown in. They're designed for effect rather than involvement, though, as well as being rather plain graphically and far more lifeless and humourless then their cheeky 2D ancestors. Like the toy line, the focus is on collecting, swapping and gambling (in multiplayer) the huge range of diminutive cars – no boats or 'copters this time around, sadly. The best way to earn them is through the singleplayer game, but it's far too hard, and too preoccupied with a proliferation of joyless or pointless mode variations like checkpoint racing and team battles.

The strangest move of all, though, is to slow the frantic, destructive pace set by *Mashed*. The weapons are hard to use effectively, and instant elimination is both rare and unspectacular; health and speed are slowly chipped away and easily replenished. Even *Mashed*'s greatest stroke of genius, the offscreen cursor-guided weapons to keep knocked-out players involved, have been rendered sluggish and weedy. Perhaps it's all in acknowledgment of the more innocent playfulness of the licence – but it might have been better to forget about *Mashed*'s power-ups completely and concentrate on tighter course design with more opportunities for old-fashioned argy-bargy.

There's a nugget of brilliance at the heart of *Micro Machines* that's too simple and solid to crush, it's true, but the laughable track editor, fussy interface and baffling load times certainly don't justify this release. A pared-down, purist *V5* would be welcome on what is surely its rightful new home – Live Arcade. **[4]**


SID MEIER'S
ALPHA
CENTAURI



TIME EXTEND

SID MEIER'S ALPHA CENTAURI

FORMAT: **MAC, PC**
PUBLISHER: **ELECTRONIC ARTS**
DEVELOPER: **FIRAXIS**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE DATE: **1999**

Firaxis' exploration of our friends and galactic neighbours left Earth, but kept hold of humanity

Many games have opened at the end of civilisation, but only *Alpha Centauri* could open at the end of *Civilization* – respositioning *Civ's* victory condition of manned flight to Alpha Centauri from a conclusion to a prelude. For those who pursued that victory it's a sobering beginning, proposing that regardless of how enlightened or ruthless your climb to power was, the Earth of 2060 you leave behind is at critical mass: a map that's been played out, save for the drawn-out bickering over the last exhausted resource tiles. In a case of life imitating turn-based strategy, those who had never touched a *Civ* title would be likely to find the setting just as plausible.

The second sucker-punch of social commentary is that 'The Future Of Mankind', the colony ship Unity's expedition to an altogether new world, seems doomed to repeat mankind's past. Critically sabotaged and its captain assassinated, the Unity's crew disintegrates ahead of the ship, splitting into seven factions to fill the ideological vacuum left in mutual co-operation's place. Here, at planetfall, the actual game begins: a to-and-fro of land and resources that, even at the time of its release, could be mistaken for *Civilization* with a red tileset. Though *Alpha Centauri's* greater sophistications as a strategy game have become more obvious with time, what's more affecting, and still

At planetfall, the actual game begins: a to-and-fro of land and resources that, even at release, could be mistaken for Civilization with a red tileset



Red xenofungus coats the planet's surface and floats on its seas, slowing movement and hampering terraforming: should colonies continually threaten the environment, it can make swift and aggressive ecological reclamation





If the demands of gameplay make the leaders more a face for an ideal than multilayered characters, they can still amount to more than the usual ciphers, with dense backstory to stand in for historical recognition

unique, is the density of expression behind it – the same kind of old-fashioned, consensual storytelling that once drew universes out of ASCII.

Speculative sci-fi risks dating badly in any medium, but the deftness of *Alpha Centauri*'s design is to focus on the human elements and let the technical follow. Freed from *Civ*'s knowing, but still jarring, anachronisms, it's ironically a more constant and believable experience than its forebear – presenting a culture with sufficiently advanced technology, then logically accelerating from it. Choosing a faction isn't an enforced roleplay of assuming its ideology, but of actively shaping it, a two-way relationship between the direction you climb the technology tree and the impact technology makes on your society. As that society solidifies from pioneer scrabbling to formative utopia, the game's social-engineering model provides a philosophical test-bed – allowing hybrid values of militant environmentalism, or benevolent profiteering. Units are provided as a combination of technologies rather than a technology unto themselves, able to be dismantled and repurposed as your faction's priorities shift.

Though the language of turn-based strategy is one of units, commodities and strategies, ask an *Alpha Centauri* player what they found most memorable and they'll talk about faction leaders (or perhaps Planet Buster warheads – but we'll get to those players later). What's remarkable about the game's seven leaders is that their personalities are developed almost subliminally: from a single portrait, from the spoken monologues that accompany tech tree developments, from their life in photographs in the corner of a commlink – home towns, first steps, first loves, family, graduation, spacewalk. While their regimes cast immediately identifiable shadows over the planetary surface – whether the totalitarian Chairman Yang's legacy of stripmines and scorched













Alpha Centauri's voxel units meant unique shapes and colour schemes at the time, and this has preserved them far better than chunky polygons and bleary textures could



earth, the green belts of Lady Dierdre's Gaians or the prolific but ascetic settlements of Sister Miriam – this defines only their figurehead: the heart remains elusive.

Sadly, it can't be found in the game's diplomacy system. By being no more and no less than is expected from the genre, it conspires to make the leaders' perfectly, humanly mercurial AIs appear schizophrenically random: a case of I Have No Dialogue Box And I Must Scream. A familiar cluster of IF=THEN threats, bribes and responses feel soulless and binary for a game that branches so overwhelmingly in other areas. That may have been the issue – considering the extent of *Alpha Centauri*'s strategic breadth, an additional seven characters' worth of adaptive dialogue and the system to support it is something of a blue-sky demand. And yet in a game that even the developers look back on as a study in interactions between people, the inability to sound out any real sense of relationship or rational discourse with your fellow leaders can only disappoint.

Or perhaps you're intentionally deprived of the human connection it would bring. Sci-fi is often at its most memorable when it provides nothing warmer than the breath to fog your visor, and *Alpha Centauri* uses its then-fashionable remoteness of presentation to distance you from its harsh frontier. From your infinitely calm viewpoint, planetside is rolling red ochre plains and bands of lonely terraformed green – with the gasping death of its atmosphere and invasive, devouring horror of its parasitic inhabitants left to asides and detached reports. Lulled by the liquid gurgles of the interface, it's a simple matter to brutally quell the

Sci-fi risks dating badly in any medium, but the deftness of Alpha Centauri's design is to focus on the human elements and let the technical follow

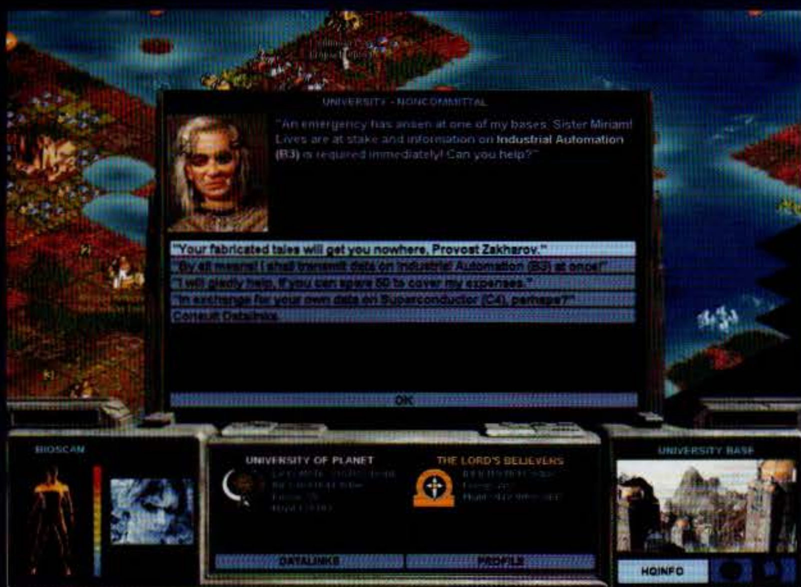


A DISTANT SOIL

Colonising untamed worlds is commonplace in space-set titles, but the relative intimacy of *Alpha Centauri* – spanning a planet, not a galaxy – is more unique. In some ways it seems a thematic continuation from lead designer Brian Reynolds' first Firaxis title, 1994's *Colonization*, which dealt with the founding of the Americas. Sci-fi settings tend towards the grandiose for their effect, but *Alpha Centauri* achieves as much atmosphere with less mass – as the strategy genre's viewpoint continues to draw in to ground level, that closeness may be a blueprint for the future.



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Whether as friends, enemies, or simply same-celled lifeforms, other factions regularly petition you to share technology. Choosing when to guard, concede or ransom it is key – even the least warlike factions have a good memory for slights



WEIRD SCIENCE

Alpha Centauri generally keeps to hard sci-fi, with the not insignificant exception of the planet itself being a psychic super-consciousness, able to muster a more focused and urgent defence against ecological contamination than Earth. The expansion, _Alien Crossfire_, keyed the chords of space opera a little more heavy-handedly with the introduction of two warring alien races, as well as another five factions born from post-Earth ideals. While _Alien Crossfire_ did strengthen its parent game, and offer the ability to create a custom faction to add to the melting pot, it makes for an experience that isn't as immediately relatable.





It's a game of mathematical beauty, from a fascinating tech tree (above) to the fractal jigsaw of its randomly-generated planetscapes. There's the sensation it's an approximation of reality by an idling supercomputer

inconvenience of a working-class revolt, or send housebroken native life scouring through a rival's colonies without thought to the aftermath (in a bureaucratic loophole, this proves too hideous to be flagged as an act of atrocity). The personal element is drowned beneath cults of personality, every interaction on a scale of thousands – which should come as no surprise to epoch-hopping *Civ* veterans, but somehow feels light-years longer.

That distance also provides space to reflect on the necessary evils of winning what is, ultimately, a game of war – and for its part *Alpha Centauri* does little to preach, or even directly pose the questions. While developers continue to debate whether their games should show or tell, *Alpha Centauri* is content for its profundity to be no more than background noise, should you choose to see it only as a turn-based strategy game. A faction doesn't need to be a philosophical connection, just an advantageous set of starting bonuses, and the moral high ground is, as ever, no defence against a tank rush. Captain Garland's assassination is never resolved, nor is your faction cleared of complicity in it, but that leaves no mechanical effect on the game other than a +1 minerals bonus for claiming the crater bearing his name. Certainly at the game's higher difficulty levels, or in multiplayer matches, there's little need for social commentary beyond the kind found in a particularly heated internet chat log.





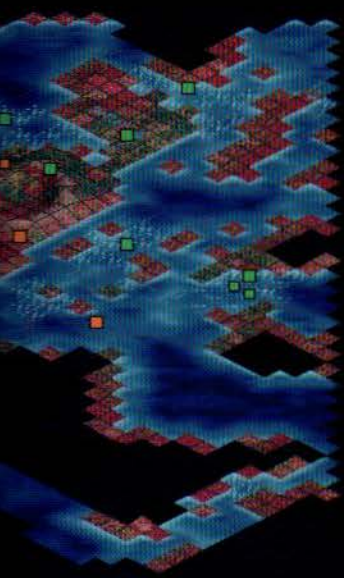
The presence of a thought-provoking narrative that can be completely sidelined shows the quiet confidence typical of Meier's studios

The presence of a thought-provoking narrative that can be completely sidelined shows the quiet confidence typical of Meier's studios: that storytelling is a client-side affair, happening somewhere between the player and the game, and all that's required of the developer is to inspire it. While it's no less of an experience for those who came for the sub-atomic weapons and not the stargazing, as evidenced by how



Each colony is a busy microcosm, supporting a military, researching projects and generating an economy while you direct its citizens' vocations to fill all these needs





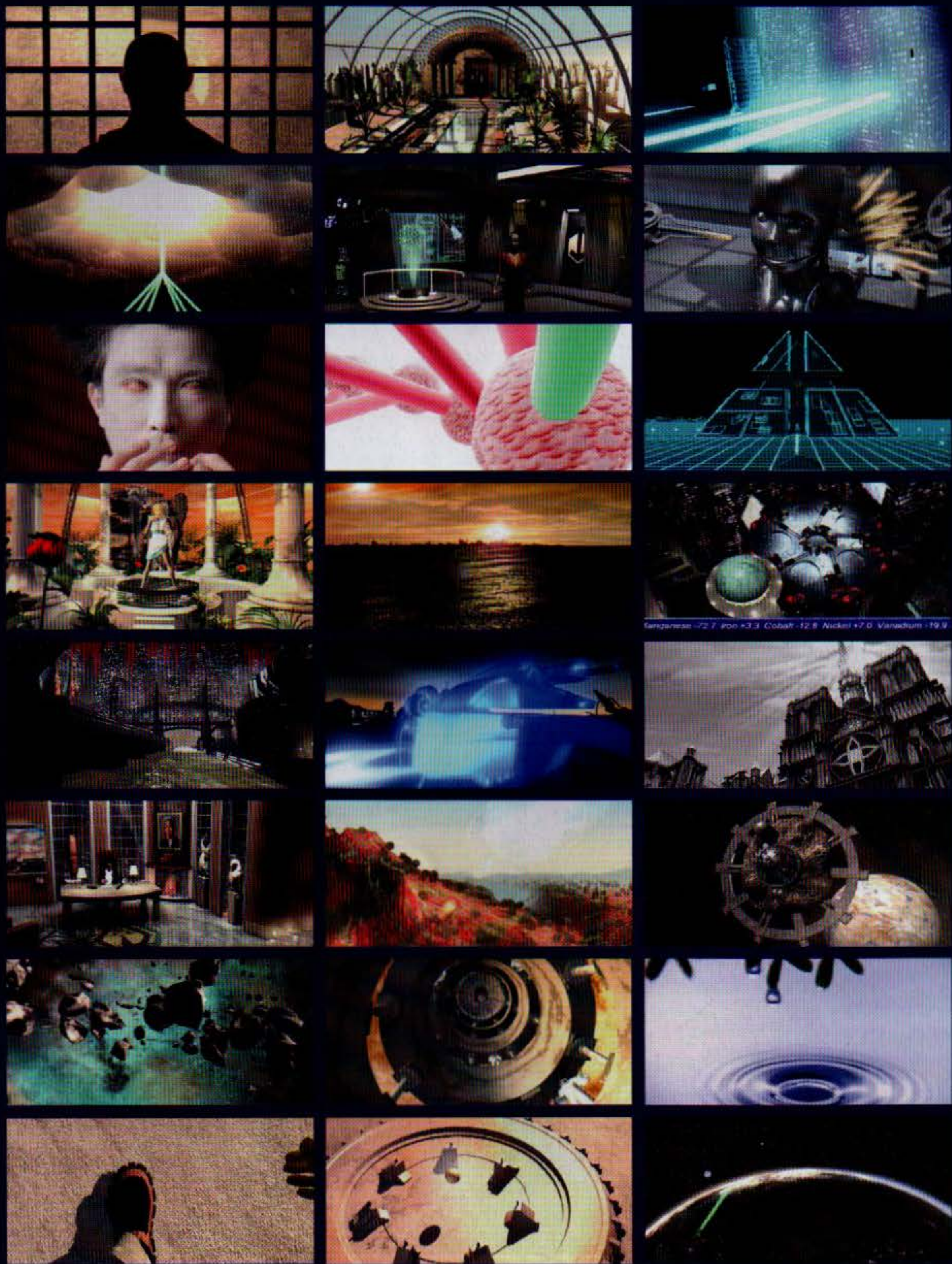


highly regarded it remains today, there's a moment of inescapable connection for even the resolutely unmoved wargamer. For if *Alpha Centauri* opens with pessimism, it closes – on almost any ending other than abject defeat – with a swell of hope and wonder in place of the expected triumphalism. It reassures that the events of the game weren't the entirety of mankind's future, but just another step, no less ginger or more significant than Gagarin's, Aldrin's, Armstrong's – that space is *big*, vast enough to contain every vector of human nature. *Alpha Centauri* is a meeting of the expression possible only in science fiction and the expression possible only in videogames: a small step, a great leap.



It helps to have enough fairweather friends to govern the UN Planetary Council. While it can be ineffectual, it's possible to pursue a pseudo-democratic victory

Though *Alpha Centauri's* FMV rewards for major achievements have dated more significantly than the rest of the game, most are still engaging and provide glimpses of what the world beyond your terminal actually looks like – as well as markers of your society's rapid acceleration from near-future to far-future



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THE MAKING OF... TWIN KINGDOM VALLEY

Forget *Oblivion's* sumptuous living world – players have been jostling with the day-to-day lives of the locals for more than two decades

ORIGINAL FORMAT: **BBC MICRO** PUBLISHER: **BUG BYTE** DEVELOPER: **TREVOR HALL** ORIGIN: **UK** RELEASE DATE: **1983**

Solipsism was clearly the philosophy of early adventure game design. The belief that only you exist, and that everything and everyone else are just products of your own mind, seems reasonable when the dragon never moves until you attack it, the guard never leaves his post and no one ever gets to the treasure before you do. Now try doing that again – but this time you're not so special.

"It's not your world," asserts **Trevor Hall**, maker of *Twin Kingdom Valley*. "You arrive there and you're a person, a creature, just like all the others. You see something shiny and think maybe you could go get it, so off you wander. You're not controlling the game – you're part of it."

Hall's goal was clear. In *Twin Kingdom Valley*, you were merely a player, not the protagonist. Yet to convince that player they really were just one more soul stumbling through the valley seeking their fortune, those other inhabitants would need to feel alive.

"I'd seen adventure games on home computers before and they seemed really boring," Hall explains. "The troll was always standing by the bridge. It made no sense! So I thought, why not make every creature in the game, including oneself, pretty much the same. Make everyone able to walk around, pick things up and fight. Let them interact."

Hall was moulding the concept of non-player characters long before the term ever became common gaming parlance. Micro adventurers in the early '80s were used to encountering elves, guards, giants and all the usual Dungeons & Dragons extras, which made it even more shocking when one decided to pick up the knife you'd just dropped and thrust it between your ribs. These 'others' meant business.

"I wanted creatures to make intelligent choices – to know when to walk and when to run. When they encounter you, they'll make a decision whether to fight based on how strong they are, or if anyone else is there too. If they're half dead, they'll make a run for it."

"You see something shiny and think maybe you could go get it, so off you wander. You're not controlling the game – you're part of it"

When 'they' encounter

'you' was key to Hall's idea of a world made up of equals. Every creature had its turn – yours came from the keyboard, theirs from some calculations and a few random numbers – and each was driven by similar motivations. Just as you mulled over whether to grasp your trusty axe and head underground or first visit the healing waters of the lake, others throughout the valley were weighing up their options. The selfish desire to survive and prosper, or an altruistic urge to aid and abet, were not the sole preserve of the human player. Your view might be limited to your current location, but things were happening everywhere.

Hall describes a typical walk in the forest: "You meet a number of creatures together in a clearing, say some elves and a troll. You flee, but when you return later, all you see is a club on the ground. That club belonged to someone. And now they're dead."

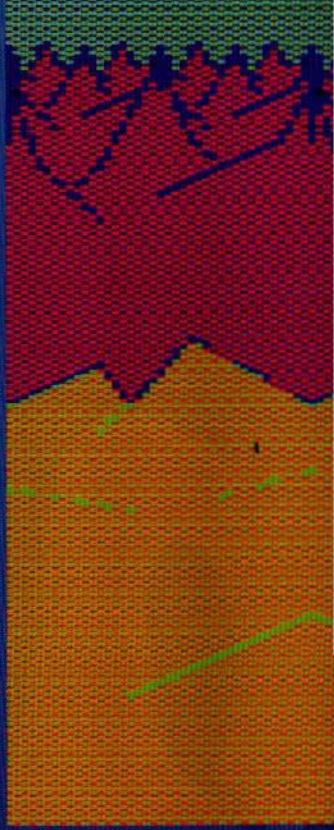
It was a poignant reminder of how life in *Twin Kingdom Valley* could be nasty, brutish and short. Thankfully, you could always rely on a little help from your friends.

Hall divided the valley folk into two camps: those that liked you and those that didn't. Ingratiate yourself with the giant by curing his illness and he'll join you in battle. Even better, storm the dungeon, hand out your spare weapons to grateful elves and suddenly, you've got a tooled-up posse on your side.

"It seemed reasonable for you to have comrades. And as your friends would fight with you, it seemed fair to be able to arm them. The giant and the strong elf actually follow you around, but if they stumble on a guard they won't just walk around him and get stabbed. They'll fight. All creatures have a priority to save



You can now get lost in the woods just using your thumb, courtesy of the updated and expanded mobile phone version



themselves and that can mean fighting battles, not following you around dumbly."

Clearly, there were limits to friendship. It illustrates Hall's determination to create a world that was logical, but also 'fair' – a society, almost. We wonder whether the whole premise – two kings sharing the same valley and the ensujng rivalry that threatens both their domains – was some political critique of the Cold War conflict that overshadowed the period, the videogame equivalent of Frankie's Two Tribes, perhaps?

Hall laughs: "Absolutely not! ELO had done a version of Hall of the Mountain King, and though I didn't get time to put that in, I did include a Hall of the Forest King. And I always thought the Forest King seemed a nicer guy. Plus raiding that Desert King's castle just felt like the right thing to do."

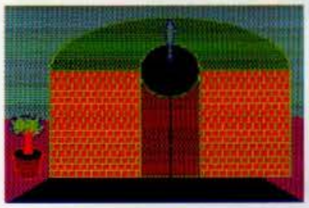
It was a formidable task, nonetheless. Guards roamed the castle corridors, heavily armed with an array of weapons. In fact, Hall's meticulous attention to detail when it came to combat meant specific weapons not only inflicted damage when used to stab or slash, each had its own value when thrown. Hurling a dagger at an escaping enemy proved far more effective than launching a weighty broadsword. Moreover, each item had its own 'fragility' value, meaning an over-used projectile would eventually smash. Keeping a holdall full of arms to draw on, deciding on which was most suited to the battle, slipping away down passageways to recover before re-entering the fray... at times, *Twin Kingdom Valley* played like a text-based *Doom*.

But this wasn't a war of words. Hall was determined his adventure would have graphics, and having concluded that the in-built graphic commands 'sucked' he set about constructing his own language. "I had to invent my own scaled vector graphics format. It was the only way, as I had nothing but a screen buffer. I needed commands to draw a tree – arcs, lines, filling and scaling – and from that I could create a whole forest. I had some interesting tricks to try and give the illusion of 3D without a proper 3D engine. Modern computers draw everything from back to front, with new objects drawn over what's behind. With the BBC, you just couldn't afford to do that. I did some coding work so the program wouldn't attempt to draw underneath something that was already there. Simulating 3D on an 8bit was a challenge."

As technically stunning as they were for the time, Hall's graphics weren't about showboating his coding skill. He used them as an integral part of the game experience rather than window dressing. Approaching Lake Watersmeet and seeing the blue expanse of water grow with each image gave a tangible sense of movement. Heading to the Sword Inn, watching the sign become slowly more legible with each redrawn screen felt like coming home. "My text was terse because of memory restrictions, but I could use graphics to tell the story. At some locations in the game, you could see half the world."

"I had some interesting tricks to try and give the illusion of 3D without a 3D engine. Simulating 3D on an 8bit was a challenge"

That sense of scale was crucial in making *Twin Kingdom Valley* such an epic adventure, and size had always mattered to Hall. Before coding had begun he'd been scrawling descriptions of locations on little green pieces of paper he'd swiped from the computer science lab at Manchester, from where he'd recently graduated. Soon, they numbered in their hundreds. "It's



WHERE THE RIVER FLOWS

Not content with revealing the secret of life, Hall also hinted at a sequel in the conclusion of *Twin Kingdom Valley*.

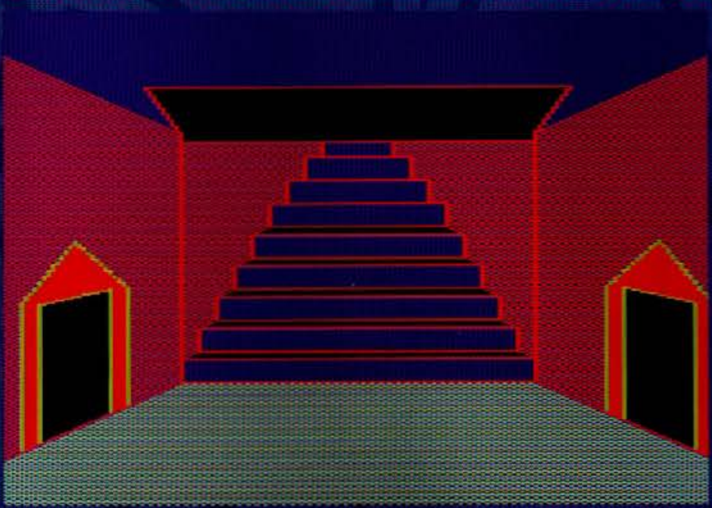
"Near the end, you find a river of gold," he recalls. "You have to wonder where it would go? And that's where the next game would take you. But how could you travel the river? What boat could withstand molten gold?"

Hall intended to push the number of creatures into the hundreds and locations into the thousands, all within 64K. He had begun designs for a desert and forest city, before deciding that his employers Bug Byte were 'truly a rotten outfit' and left the games industry all together. But we can exclusively reveal that the long awaited *Valley Of Gold* is in development – an ending much happier than the usual *TKV* death at the hands of an irate Desert King.



Hall created his own graphics language with 3,000 commands for the game's pseudo-3D look. A version of it still sits on his laptop, which came in handy for the recent mobile phone release







Above: Text input was more complex than the usual 'verb-noun' construct. You could Give Axe to Elf or Put Gold in Holdall, but careful with that lit lamp. Left: Graphics were drawn with startling speed for the period. The C64 version even supplemented the images with moving sprites – recalling the bouncing bunny and flickering fire at the game's opening should warm many a veteran gamer's heart

boring if you only have 20 places to visit. If you don't have some 'dead' locations with nothing happening, you go from one nasty disaster to another, which is too intense. You need padding, to get lost before you find something."

Twin Kingdom Valley gave you room to wander and wonder. Hall not only provided space to explore – and with 175 locations, increased to 190 for the C64 version, there was much to see – he actively encouraged you to roam and revisit. The inspirational moment when you drink from the magical waters and the 'secret of concealed doors' is revealed to you, the first time you stumble upon a gorilla, or when you naïvely put a lit lamp in your holdall and watch in horror as it's engulfed in flame… the valley is full of surprises. "I couldn't resist putting in that little gag," chuckles Hall. "Do you really think they had steel holdalls back then?"

It was another example of not only humour, but Hall's relentless application of logic. The mightily useful holdall had a limited capacity, but not the usual fixed number of items found in most adventures of the time. Each object in the game was attributed a weight and only so much could be carried. Your health and strength were variables too. Stay out of trouble and you would slowly recover, or drink and you'd be refreshed – though knocking back ale in the Sword Inn would quench your thirst but reduce your strength, like a modern FPS health pack with consequences.

Twenty years later, you can see echoes of what Hall was trying to achieve most clearly in online play. While he toiled to give life to his NPCs, to imbue them with desires, goals and allegiances through compressed tables of data, now we can substitute stay-in teens or Korean professionals. Those ideas of exploring, fighting and befriending have evolved, but the thrill of discovery remains eternal. And how better to conclude the quest than by revealing nothing less than the secret of life?

"The most points you can get in the game is 1,024 – the number of bytes in 1K. Yes, I know, but we were all nerds back then. I knew how hard the game was to complete so I wanted to give the player something else. As for the 'secret,' well, I thought maybe Be Nice, or Be Friends, or Have a Beer, but no, in the end I went for…"

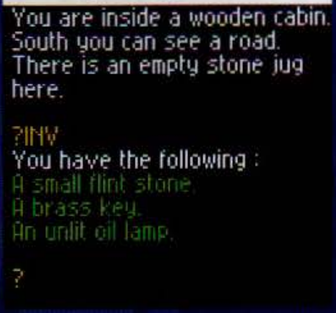
But then that would be spoiling things. Hall is, however, prepared to reveal the location of the final treasure. "I kept all the designs for the game, all those hundreds of bits of green paper, in a cardboard box. The cat would sleep on it and eventually gave birth on top of it. It became part of the furniture and I left it in the flat when I moved out. I know the people in there after me never tidied up so I'm pretty sure it stayed there 'til they bulldozed Hulme in the '90s. I could give you the map reference if you want!"



TKV TO GO

The vibrant valley is set to make a triumphant and highly convenient return. Developer Ian Pare has been busy producing a version for mobile phones, complete with a predictive text input option and remarkably faithful graphics.

During the project, UK-based Pare developed a correspondence with Hall, who now lives in California. Despite having left game design behind in Blighty two decades ago, Hall was soon newly inspired and ended up contributing new locations, creatures, pictures and puzzles to the game. Thus the final product is an expanded version of the fuller C64 version and is available for download from www.twinkingdomvalley.co.uk







Hall handled the BBC and C64 versions, but contracted out the Spectrum conversion, which was overshadowed by *The Hobbit*. The games were developed simultaneously, the latter's more hallowed status down to it being for the bigger Speccy market, believes Hall

Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

BLITZ GAMES

COMPANY NAME: Blitz Games

DATE FOUNDED: 1990

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 180

STUDIO HEADS: Philip and Andrew Oliver

URL: www.BlitzGames.com
www.VolatileGames.com



Reservoir Dogs **is based on the movie, and will be the first release from the Volatile Games division**





LOCATION: Leamington Spa, Midlands, UK

SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY

Pac-Man World 3 (GC, PC, PSP, PS2, Xbox), *Bratz: Rock Angelz* (GC, PS2), *Fairly OddParents 1 & 2* (GC, PS2, Xbox), *Bad Boys II* (PC, PS2, Xbox), *Taz: Wanted* (GC, PC, PS2, Xbox), *Fuzion Frenzy* (Xbox)

CURRENT PROJECTS:

Spongebob Squarepants: Creature From The Krusty Krab (GC, PS2, Wii), *Reservoir Dogs* (PC, PS2, Xbox), *Karaoke Revolution: American Idol* (PS2), *Possession* (360, PS3)

ABOUT THE STUDIO

"Blitz Games is one of the UK's leading independent developers and has recently moved into a new office with space for over 250 staff. Founded by industry veterans Philip and Andrew Oliver, the company's driving philosophy is to create critically and commercially successful games within a stable, friendly and professional environment.

"Well respected throughout the industry, Blitz has won numerous awards including the TIGA Greatest Contribution to Games Development award in 2005. Industry-leading in-house technology provides a powerful and stable platform for all the company's development and a dedicated approach to looking after all employees results in one of the industry's lowest staff turnover rates.

"The company recently launched two new divisions allowing dedicated teams to focus on a wide variety of work. Blitz continues to create the family-friendly content that has been the company's foundation while Volatile Games targets the older gamer with more mature content. TruSim is spearheading the UK's move into the field of 'serious games' and has already won several significant contracts using existing technology to create engaging training applications in the fields of medicine, education and government.

"Major new work is already underway on all platforms, and the company aims to continue its growth through 2006 with an active recruitment campaign targeting industry-experienced staff."

TruSim

VOLATILE games



Spongebob Squarepants **will be a Wii launch title, and makes imaginative use of the controller**

Codeshop

Tracking developments in development

Moving to a new beat

Character animation company NaturalMotion is looking to revolutionise next-gen games with Euphoria, its realtime engine

Talk to most game insiders about next-generation hardware and the conversation will quickly turn to teraflops of processing power or some arcane bus bandwidth capacity. For **Torsten Reil**, CEO of Oxford middleware company NaturalMotion, however, the defining factor is different: "Next-gen games will be about unique moments," he predicts. "Moments that have never happened before and will never happen again."

Of course, as the CEO of middleware company, his enthusiasm has a particular focus: NaturalMotion's new character animation engine Euphoria, which is already pulling in the plaudits thanks to its high profile use in the forthcoming Indiana Jones game, amongst other unannounced LucasArts properties.

NaturalMotion has also signed up another large publisher, which can't yet be revealed, with the first game to use the tech described by Reil as 'massive'.

"Initially, we've chosen to work with two clients because their intellectual property is very strong and they were committed to the technology," he explains. "LucasArts really wants to push next gen, and that makes our job much easier because we don't have to do any convincing."

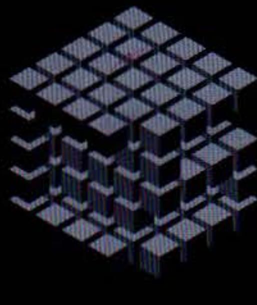
"Next-gen games will be about unique moments that have never happened before and will never happen again."

But while any CEO worth his salt will attempt to make such claims, Reil has more justification than most. Set up in 2003, NaturalMotion's first product, Endorphin, was a neat piece of technology that enabled developers and filmmakers to generate lots of character animation fast. Priced at £5,500 a box,



The first announced game to use Euphoria is LucasArts' *Indiana Jones 2007*, but the publisher will also be using the technology for other forthcoming games, and another large publisher has also signed up





Endorphin made its mark, and was used in games such as *Tekken 5* and films like Troy and Poseidon.

As an offline process however, where animators had to compress their pre-scripted work onto disk – just as they would have done with hand animation or motion capture data – it was only ever the precursor of more ambitious things to come. Indeed, as Reil himself admitted when Endorphin was first launched: "The potential of the technology is that it will work well realtime but we've decided to prove ourselves first. It will take a long time to make the realtime engine robust, whereas we can deliver Endorphin relatively quickly."

Three years on, that potential has been realised in Euphoria, which will imbue characters with the closest thing to intelligent animation yet seen in a game. A realtime animation engine, using it means characters should react to the actual conditions they face in a game, rather than going through the motions an animator pre-programmed for them.

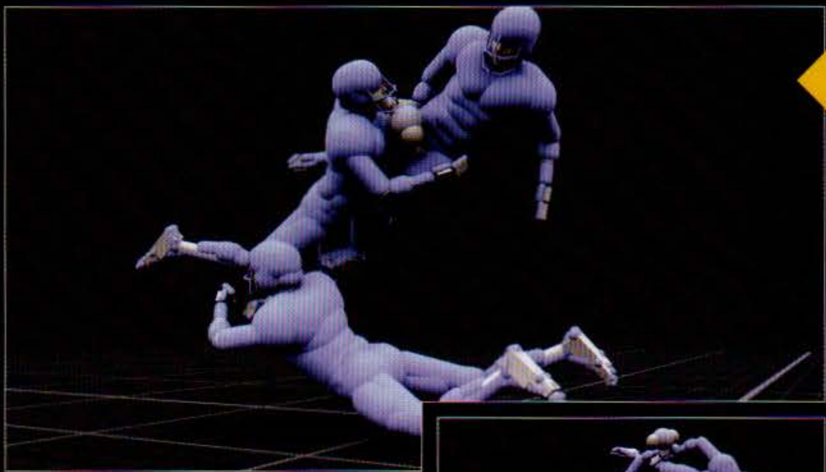
"Our partners know the best way to use Euphoria isn't just to make animations more realistic," Reil says. "We're banking on the fact that every so often a really cool thing will happen in a game you will want to show your mates, or maybe even upload to a server and have everyone else see it."

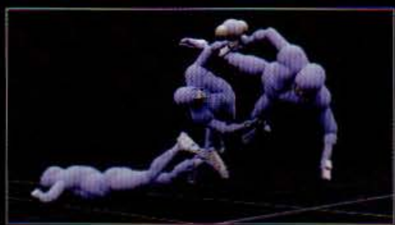
It's certainly an ambitious goal considering middleware isn't supposed to make games better, only cheaper, quicker and easier to develop. Even on that score Reil has something new to offer though. "Euphoria isn't middleware," he argues. "We have a co-development relationship with our clients. We work closely with them, which means we have people working directly with them, usually on-site."

A knock-on effect is that Euphoria is expensive. Reil won't reveal exactly how much, but says that pricing is one reason the company has partnered with big publishers rather than small developers. "You can make a simple, back-of-the-envelope calculation balancing the amount of money you're spending on Euphoria with the extra number of units of your game you have to ship," he says. "It's a no-brainer."

But back to those unique moments. As shown in LucasArts' E3 demo with Indiana Jones fighting on top of a San Francisco cable car, Euphoria's selling point will be the way it enables game characters to interact with environments.

Mixing robotic control theory with the biomechanical limits of the human body, Euphoria brings procedural animation into play for the first time. For example, use your whip and your Euphoria-controlled opponent may fall off the cable car. Reload and try the same thing again, and subtle differences in the conditions may mean he manages to grab hold of the rail around the car's top and hang on, allowing you to administer justice from above. Or alternatively imagine the possibilities of a contact sport such as rugby or American football, where the exact physics of a tackle may result in success, failure or something even more spectacularly next-gen. That collision of limbs is the dream of Torsten Reil and NaturalMotion.





Euphoria's unique selling point is its ability to automatically generate game animation which is physically correct and a by-product of factors such as momentum, inertia and the properties of the human body





A two-tone approach

Euphoria consists of two basic components. The first is Euphoria:core, which is the actual animation engine. This is a lightweight component that needs to be integrated with the main game engine and also feeds into the game's physics engine. With these links in place, a character's animation stream can be switched from pre-canned animations, created by an animator, to the procedural animation driven by Euphoria. Typically, Euphoria can be used to drive the animation of around five onscreen characters, usually those that are the most important or closest to the camera.

One of the best features of the technology is its non-disruptive nature, so developers can use it initially to replace a small number of animations. If it works well, more canned animations can be replaced with Euphoria. Alternatively, if it doesn't work, Euphoria can be replaced in turn by pre-canned animations.

The other component to the technology is Euphoria: studio, which is the authoring environment used to create the animation behaviours applied to characters. At present, these are created by NaturalMotion's engineers, but in time, developers will be able to make their own. Euphoria:studio also contains links into modelling and animation packages, so animators can import their skeletons and data.

"The animators often create pre-visualisation data of what they want the animations to look like, which our engineers then use to create a behaviour," says Torsten Reil. "Usually the animators will then want to tweak the animations, and we will expose the parameters so they can play around with them. The big advantage of this approach is our clients can hit the ground running."



BY JEFF MINTER

YAK'S PROGRESS Notes from the game designer's workshop

SUMMER LOVIN'

I feel a bit weird – a strange thing happened the other day. I wandered into Game, as I am wont to do on weekend excursions into Carmarthen – it's a stock part of the weekly trajectory, past the shop that sells unbelievably kitsch items that I simply cannot imagine buying in a non-ironical sense, pausing briefly to get a packet of Camel from the tobacconists that for some reason has a sign saying 'Northern British' outside although we are quite plainly in west Wales, nipping into the pie shop to get a similarly-displaced Cornish pastie, arriving at the brushing-crumbs-out-of-beard phase of consumption just as I arrive at Game. Wander in, have a mooch around, and as usual there isn't much I'm actually interested in buying (apart from maybe that 360 WWII flying game, but that can wait until it gets below £50 I think). I've got plenty of 360 stuff to be going on with and I've had my DS games already on import since I can't be bothered waiting for the UK release schedule. My *Animal Crossing* town is already six months old, thank you so much Nintendo Europe.

I notice that they have notices stuck up on the wall inviting me to pre-register my interest in the PlayStation 3, and you know what? I don't feel anything. No urge to make a beeline for the counter to put my name down, no anxiety that the notices might have been up a few days and that therefore I might be further back in the queue than I would have liked – nothing. Can't be arsed.

That made me feel... weird. I've always been an inveterate early adopter of consoles. I had the first Dreamcast in Carmarthen out of that very Game a few years ago. Most recently I was there at 7.30am on a cold December morning last year with half-a-dozen other silly buggers to collect my 360. DS and PSP straight from Japan, no messing waiting around for tardy UK releases. I remember waiting by the phone for the call to let me know my PS2 was in the shop and rushing to collect it. A stepdown, a modern telly and companies willing to ship me stuff from anywhere on the planet in response to a few mouse clicks mean that if I really want to I can have gaming hardware from anywhere pretty much as soon as it's available, and by and large over the years that is exactly what I've done.

So it did surprise me, not feeling the familiar Pavlovian response to a preorder availability notification. Partly it's Sony's fault, I guess – yes, I saw some nice stuff at E3, but nothing particularly super-wow, nothing of the sort that has you wishing your summer away gagging for the release date and perfectly willing to buy the hardware just to play the one game. Sony could probably have completely had me if there was lovely, sweet HD footage of a new *Wipeout* for PS3 at E3 – I've made sweet, animal love to each iteration of that series over a succession of Sony consoles, and the thought of spending my Christmas in a comfortably enhanced frame of mind zooming around eye-poppingly beautiful HD circuits at insane speeds with some banging choons on would have had my name at the top of the perorder list in no time. However there wasn't a sniff of any *Wipeout*. There was some other futuristic racer thing that looked OK, but it wasn't *Wipeout*.

"Sony could probably have completely had me if there was lovely, sweet HD footage of a new Wipeout for PS3 at E3"

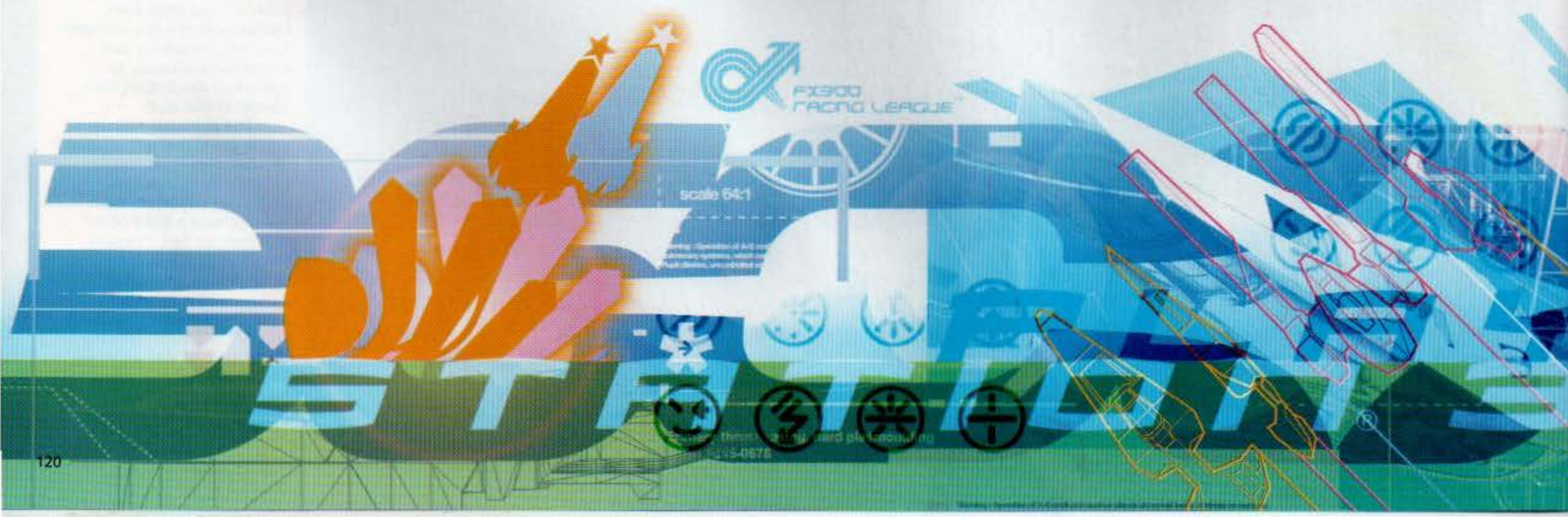
It doesn't help that Ken Kutaragi comes over as a bit of a smeeeee sometimes, too. Some of his talk about the PS3 has seemed pretty bizarre and it makes Sony's attitude seem incredibly arrogant. They seem absolutely certain that even when they say that it's going to be considerably more expensive than existing consoles, and that maybe there won't be that many titles actually available at launch, nonetheless us eager customers will rush out in droves to buy it because, hey, it's a new PlayStation. Yeah, you've got a good reputation and the lion's share of the current market, but don't get smug, Sony. Nobody likes smug, and it's not an attitude that has served companies well in videogame history. We need games, not smugness, games that will make me want to get hold of the PS3 rather than a bunch of stuff either identical or broadly similar to what I'll be playing on my 360. I want sweet Feisar temptation, not a bit of a snotty attitude.

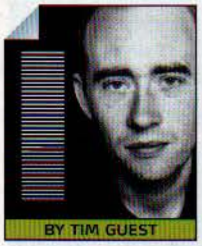
Just making the shiniest, most expensive hardware doesn't cut it these days. Sure, the PSP was beautiful, shining, pretty and posh, whereas the DS was definitely the ugly sister. But hey, the ugly sister is better in the sack.

I don't think it's all Sony's fault, of course. I am sure the PS3 is very capable, and eventually it'll take its place along with the rest in my console pile, and there will be some cracking games to play on it. Part of it's probably due to the homogenisation of games that I talked about last time. And maybe part of it is also simply due to the usual summer videogame inertia. Winter is more of a time for gaming, dark nights in front of the plasma, warm indoors with controller in hand. In summer one would rather be outside cuddling the sheep.

Yes, I'm sure that's it, just a bit of summer inertia, not videogames becoming a bit rubbish lately. Just give me my *Wipeout* and I'll be fine.

Jeff Minter is the founder of UK codeshop Llamasoft, whose most recent project was Xbox 360's onboard audio visualiser





THE GUEST COLUMN Postcards from the online universe

GAMING TOGETHER

Last month saw my sister's 13th birthday and, at her request, I bought her some virtual gold. I logged on to IGE, selected the *World Of WarCraft* European server Onyxia, paid $36.90 from my credit card and the next day – her birthday – she received 500 gold pieces. She went on a virtual shopping spree, and that afternoon I logged on, created a character on her server, and we went for a stroll through the deserts and jungles of Azeroth.

My sister lives in Germany, and this was the first chance I've had to hang out with her in six months. She took me on a tour of her world, pausing considerately every few minutes or so as I was munched by a passing scarecrow or T-Rex (her character was level 40; mine was level one). She showed me the weapons and armour she'd bought with my virtual gift. Both she and my father, who lives with her, play *World Of WarCraft*; now she has her own PC (he bought her one for her birthday), they'll play online together.

> "My daughters and I hit the shopping block in Toontown Online. It was the most fun I've ever had online, just hearing them giggle"

Drawing near the end of my journey into shared virtual worlds, I find it takes me closer to home. I was born in the '70s, in the decade where people – and especially families – drifted apart. (The '70s are the only decade in which Richard Dreyfuss's character Roy Neary, in Close Encounters Of The Third Kind, would believably trade his family for some flashing lights and an elongated silhouette.) Like many children of the '70s, I too experienced the agonies of separation. When I was four, my mother fell in love with the Indian guru Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, a bearded man-god who promised ecstasy and delivered mainly absence. In the communes that bore his name, she and her friends danced, rolled their heads, swayed their arms, beat cushions, broke down their social conditioning and set themselves free. Meanwhile, we children filled our lives as best we could with the things we found around us.

I filled the space with my imagination. Bhagwan had already stripped away our past and our Lego; then he began to predict the end of the world, through nuclear war and disease. I began to imagine this had already happened. In my daytime reveries, hidden behind a commune sofa with a doorstop Marmite sandwich, I clambered over the rubble of civilisation. By chance, I had uncovered the purpose of the imagination: to conquer absence. Our dreams give us a lens through which to examine what we lack – just as virtual worlds do.

In January this year, a survey showed that 30 per cent of parents play games with their children, and that two thirds of those felt that the games had brought their families closer together.

Now, even estranged families can use these online worlds to stay close. **Clay Thompson** arranged for a specific clause in his divorce decree to allow for three hours of webcam contact with his children per week, and now spends time with them online. "My son loves it when I make him invulnerable and spawn dragon after dragon in *Neverwinter Nights*," he told Computer Games Magazine. "My daughters and I hit the shopping block in *Toontown Online* and then go back to their virtual home to try [our purchases] on together. It was the most fun I've ever had online, just hearing them giggle."

Virtual worlds don't always bring families together. In April this year, in Dunedin, Florida, father Joseph Langenderfer burst into his son's room after an argument, waving a pistol. Langenderfer thought his son spent too much of his time playing online games instead of doing the laundry. His plan: shoot his son's computer. Happily, the bullet hit the wall instead, but Langenderfer Snr was held for attempted murder.

In a consumer society, the American sociologist Ivan Illich observed, "there are two kinds of slaves: the prisoners of addiction and the prisoners of envy." Videogames, which offer a favourable ratio of reward to effort, have always presented the problem of the first; now, our virtual worlds offer us the chance to become enslaved with envy.

My own mother's addiction, to her guru, took her away from me for nearly ten years. I found her again, but that discovery delivered its own kind of trouble. It turns out we can leave our families, or we can stay, but they break our hearts either way.

The western world is a kind of family, and we too have a kind of broken heart. Since the '70s, the number of Europeans living alone has doubled. At the end of a century of the self, we have found ourselves, but we have lost each other. Perhaps, though, we can now enact our stretched-out family lives through virtual worlds, as we once examined them through the lens of cinema. "My son and I have become much closer through gaming," Thompson said. "It offers quality time I wouldn't get otherwise. I'm taking care of my kids online like I would if I was there."

Tim Guest is working on a book about virtual worlds. Contact him if you have a virtual tale to tell via tim@timguest.net




BY MR BIFFO

BIFFOVISION Grumble feature enabled

IS SONY HISTORY?

Our perception of human history is like looking through blinkers. We work, we eat, scratch our arses and live in the here and now. We take our position in history for granted, as it's pretty much all we've known.

It seems impossible right now that the USA could be superseded as a major world power, that its economy could collapse, and the world be catapulted into a major war. Yet if you take off the blinkers then America looks destined to fall. It's an empire, and all empires have their day, and a change is definitely coming.

The games industry is the same. It may be relatively young, but even in its short lifetime you can see patterns repeating. You could see Sega would one day be forced to drop out of the hardware market from the minute it released the MegaCD. The 3DO was a donkey from day one, the N-Gage a joke before it had even been released, Nintendo's formerly family-friendly image was never going to be a majority winner, and Sony's PlayStation had a momentum that was going to trample on everything in its path.

All were echoes of gaming history. Mistakes repeated, and familiar strategies got right.

You can feel that change in the air right now. It's as if the natural rhythms of the world won't let any one player dominate for too long; Atari, Amiga, Nintendo, Sega, Rome, Britain, Tory, Labour – all have been knocked from their a seemingly impenetrable perch. Now, in the wake of E3, and after ruling the roost across two generations of console hardware, the tide has turned violently against Sony.

The Xbox was loved by a few, but the 360 got it right, despite most of us expecting it to languish, like its predecessor, in the second division. Yet thanks to the Xbox Live Arcade, the wireless controllers, some genuinely decent games, the sheer aesthetic beauty of the thing – it has defied predictions. Somehow it has straddled both the hardcore and the mainstream, both student and youngster. I admit, I've been proved wrong; at the time I thought the 360 launch line-up was mostly rubbish, but with hindsight it was well pitched. There was something for everyone, and *Call Of Duty 2* and *Geometry Wars* pretty much justified the purchase by themselves.

The Japanese still think it stinks, but the rest of us, for the most part, have been won over.

But it's not just the 360 that Sony has to worry about. Despite initial caution from most of us, Nintendo's next-generation plans have now been warmly embraced by the thighs of just about everyone. And that's even with a name-change that elicited shrill honks of derision on message boards around the world.

> " Atari, Amiga, Nintendo, Sega, Rome, Britain, Tory, Labour – all have been knocked from their a seemingly impenetrable perch "

More unexpected still, since its unveiling at E3, Wii has caught the imagination of the mass media. Maybe they looked at it because of the less-stupid-the-more-you-hear-it name, rather than in spite of it. Or maybe they've been genuinely seduced by the iPod whiteness, and the control interface, and the fact we won't just be playing the same old games.

Or maybe everyone's just looking at the PlayStation 3, and realising it looks a bit shit. I never liked it from day one myself. The silver looks cheap, and the logo was in the sort of font used for '80s straight-to-video sci-fi films (you know: ones with a grainy photo of Michael Ironside or Dolph Lundgren on the cover, holding a gun that looks like it's been cobbled together from an old Airfix plane, while standing in front of a futuristic car that doesn't actually appear in the movie).

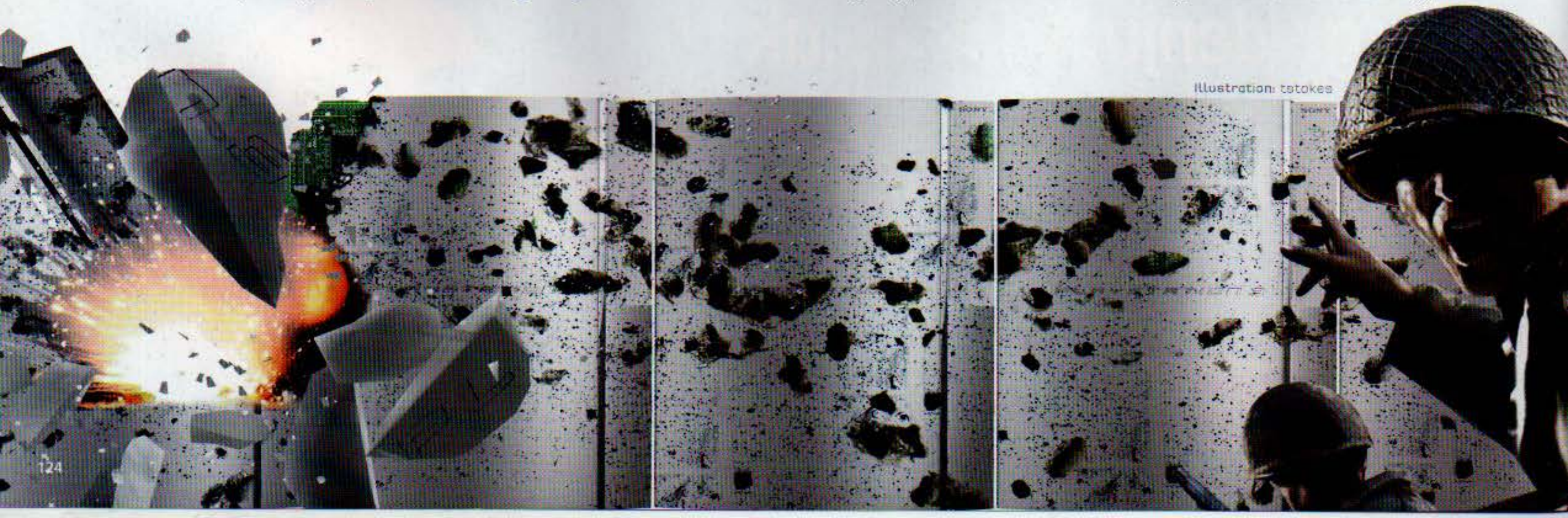
Sony has, at least, got shot of the ridiculous boomerang controller, but it was clear from the off that those infamous screenshot mock-ups were never going to be achievable. And when the games were unveiled at E3 it was obvious the console falls far short of the sort of power Sony has been hyping. It was a bit like the disparity between Spinal Tap's vision of a towering triptych and the on-stage reality.

Then there were those damaging comparisons of the peripheral and expansion slots on the back of the prototype compared to the finished model, the me-too factor of the motion-sensing controller, slipped release dates and a retail price point that, frankly, siphons the widdle. The media even seemed to pick up on, and criticise, Sony's decision to release two models – conveniently forgetting Microsoft took the same route with the 360.

Worse still for Sony, on many levels the PSP has disappointed. The UMD has been a failure, and – while there's no denying that it's more powerful than Nintendo's DS – I find it horrible as a games machine. Playing on it makes my hands bleed. They put cosmetics over comfort, and consequently I only use mine for playing downloaded movie files (OK, and a bit of *Me & My Katamari*) – which benefits Sony not a jot.

As it stands, I think Sony has a fight on its hands, pretty much for the first time since it launched the PlayStation brand. There's no doubt that it won't be a fight Sony will give up on easily – a PlayStation 4 is an inevitability – but I think the days of its monopoly are long behind us. Plus ça change. Whatever that means.

Mr Biffo co-founded Digitiser, Channel 4's Teletext-based videogames section, and now writes mainly for television


Illustration: tstokes

inbox



Issue 164

ONLINE OFFLINE

Choice cuts from Edge Online's discussion forum

Topic: Games are for children

Most games are repetitive, dumb, patronising, badly scripted, cliched and only 'mature' in the sense that they have bloody violence and women with big tits in stupidly revealing and impractical costumes. So, video games are clearly for children and teenagers and adults like us shouldn't be playing them and pretending they are anything else, right?
JB

I don't play 'most games'.
subatai

There are a lot of people on this forum in their twenties. I would argue that gaming is perhaps for kids if one would concede that childhood now extends into the twenties: we're not having kids in our twenties etc, it is a kidulthood, a hedonistic time of high disposible income and low responsibility. Perhaps gaming isn't for kids, maybe adults have just started learning to have fun.
Florian Schneider

I wish I could agree with people who say that gameplay is king, but I just can't. I'm not saying that because I'm a graphics whore, or prefer games that wish they were films. People who play games to escape are thought of as sad, but it's those who treat gaming as a canvas for developing and honing certain skills that seem like the truly sad ones, since they chase after abilities that could instead be applied really well in day-to-day life, specialist vocations that require dexterity, mental fortitude and dedication. If these things are so vital to your experience, then why not base your life around them? Society needs more skilled individuals willing to push themselves to the brink of competition-level deftness.

I didn't mean to frame that in such an insulting way, but I've done so for the sake of argument. Why bother pretending to be a female archeologist who dives down huge waterfalls and battles otherworldly creatures? Simple – you can't get that anywhere else. Why do people insist on studying the frame-by-frame properties of beat 'em ups, and pushing their reactions to the limit in videogames instead of the real world? It's because escapism is king, not gameplay. It's entirely secondary to the force that initially pulls you through the rabbit hole. And I think 'hardcore' gamers should remember that when pouring scorn on those who put *FIFA* at the top of the charts – they're experiencing a dream, not chasing an ideal, or pretending to be scientists and pioneers.
Anthony Warlow

"Why bother pretending to be an archeologist who dives down huge waterfalls and battles otherworldly creatures? Simple – you can't get it anywhere else"

I've been thinking a lot about Nintendo's new machine. I've seen umpteen videos of it being played, and have a good idea of the motions needed to play. And I've got to say that, despite loving the ideas and the freshness, I'm going to have trouble embracing it. First is the physical issue – gaming for me, however intense, is still essentially a bit of relaxation, as I sit there twiddling the joypad and little else (well, apart from occasionally barking at the screen). For example, I love my *Tony Hawk* games, but the idea of having to thrust the pad forward to activate a boost in *Downhill Jam* is one that, during an hour's play, will really get to me. Regardless of how responsive the system, I'm still going to have to make it recognise these relatively large movements. Is that a bad example to pick? That's the one that's in my mind, anyhow. The shift of Wii is far more than a creative one and, when I arrive home from work, I'm not going to choose flailing and exaggerated movements over the subtle, small movements of a joypad setup that I've spent years getting super-comfortable with. That's the one thing that Wii, for me, trades off for innovation – comfort. But maybe I'll get one and it'll shake all the cobwebs out and I'll be loving it.

Second, though, is a space issue, which is what few people seem to have talked about. I love my gaming rig. A good chair, a good sound system and a good, low TV, all pretty close together. There's no way for Wii to fit into that without me having to calibrate my set-up all over again; I see all these people playing while standing up and flapping about; again, the comfort that I've established over the years would have to be messed about to accommodate Nintendo's new approach. But that's the entire point, I suppose. People like me are dead weight in Wii's new strategy of bringing gaming to people who don't have what I have. Anyway, I hope I work something out. The idea of having to part ways with Nintendo makes me a little sad, but my current relationship with gaming is wicked and perfectly integrated into my life. I'm not sure I want to disrupt that so I can swing a 'real' tennis racquet instead of just jabbing a button.
Finley Andrews

Nintendo's emphasis on the physical nature of the Wii is perhaps starting to backfire. It needs to show more sedate games which require mouse-style movements of the Remote to convince traditional gamers of the Wii's viability.

Having read Ian Jackson's comments in **E**164, I have never felt so compelled to react to or, more significantly, distance myself from a letter printed in **Edge**.

I would hardly believe that 'most **Edge** readers' are ignorant and pathetic enough to pay to see any bad film. Not to mention attending the opening night of any film based on a videogame that had been widely criticised.

Have some self-respect. He deserves all the sneers he has had and will evidently continue to have until he opens his eyes. In my view, he personifies what is currently wrong with the videogame industry: how it is perceived – by the publishers and other industries. He is living proof that there is still a lot of money to be made from shallow and meaningless product association, even via the hardcore

sector of the gaming community. I used to be proud to call myself a hardcore gamer. However, these days it means something else – something a lot less desirable.
Paul Powell

In his first appearance in person at this year's E3, it seems that Bill Gates' ultimate aim has finally been revealed. Dipping into the console market is not something Microsoft did on a whim. Nobody just woke up one day and thought: "This games machine thing looks like a bit of a laugh", and it was not just a quick attempt to siphon some money from Sony and Nintendo. Well, it was that, but more importantly it was a foot in the door.

It only requires a cursory glance at the history of the home computing market to build a pretty good idea of the company's mentality when it comes to making money. Namely, if enough people have to use your product in order to use another product, eventually they won't ever give any money to anyone else.

While Nintendo and Sony have seemingly been coming up with ways to entice people into using their systems, Microsoft have apparently been more concerned with finding a way to stop people using other machines. No doubt Live Anywhere was a name decided on in a meeting in which it was agreed that calling it what it actually was would scare people off. Let's not kid ourselves – the service really should be called Live Everywhere; the Orwellian nightmare of videogaming in which Microsoft control all that you see and hear.

It's quite a claim that, for example, you could play matches on *Championship Manager* on 360, tweak the team and tactics on your mobile and then play another match on a PC at some point. It's impressive, but is it really desirable? Do gamers want to have their games take over their lives to that extent? Are people willing to buy the same game on three different formats? Most people play games to relax rather than as a competitive sport. Is this perhaps another example of Microsoft misjudging their audience?
Jonathan Mack



David Gormley is dismayed by some gamers' reaction to news of *Legend Of Zelda: Twilight Princess*' Link being voted a gay pin-up

"Let's not kid ourselves – the service should really be called Live Everywhere; a videogaming nightmare in which Microsoft controls all that you see and hear"

Microsoft's vision for Live Anywhere is certainly ambitious, but it's worth remembering that its entry into the console marked sparked similar – and similarly unfounded – fears of an Orwellian future for gaming.

I doubt there are many people who could spend in excess of £400 on something as frivolous as a PlayStation 3 without incurring an accompanying feeling of guilt. Nor should they be expected to.Not only is Sony's pricing ill-advised, pushing the company closer to the likes of Exxon in the stakes of rapacious capitalism, and raising their console beyond the financial reach of thousands of potential customers, it is also completely unacceptable.

There should be no ambivalence on the matter; no question of whether consumers are still willing to pay what they used to for consoles. At its intended price, the PS3 will probably become something of a status symbol among those who can ill afford it, and those who can are likely to begrudgingly make the sacrifice, but they simply should not have to.

As far as I am concerned, the so-called 'console war' always comes down to games. Thus the competition between the 360 and the PS3 can be reduced to *Gears Of War* vs *Heavenly Sword* (or whatever one considers to be the prized jewel in each crown).

However, in light of the PS3's price I do not care how "organic" *Heavenly Sword* may feel or how exciting *Metal Gear Solid 4* may be. I fail to believe either game would not be possible on the 360, and I refuse to pay almost £150 more for what may or may not be slightly superior hardware. It is a matter of principle.

Desperate gamers may have been willing to spend £800 to secure a rare 360 at its Christmas release, but this was by no means intended to set a precedent. That, however, is exactly what Sony are trying to do with the PS3.

Microsoft's and Nintendo's aggressive pricing during the last generation proved that the rules of the game had changed. Sony must not get away with forcing the industry to backtrack.
Auberry Dorian

Whether or not *Heavenly Sword* could be done on 360, the fact remains that it *won't* be done. But the question for Sony is will its roster of exclusive titles be enough to convince buyers that the price is worth it, if – as seems likely – the first wave of software doesn't look dramatically better than on 360.

A little late to the party, maybe, but I've recently been enjoying *Battlefield 2: Modern Combat* on the 360, even with the stupid voice-comms-loss bug in multiplayer. One thing puzzles me, though – on playing my first game, I received an email from EA with a cheat to unlock all of the weapons in singleplayer mode.

One thing I've always thought EA does really well is its reward systems. Other EA games I've played offer a seemingly endless source of in-game 'things' to unlock – cars, hats, tracks, whatever. It doesn't change the game itself in any way, really, it just adds a sense of accomplishment. But here, in *Battlefield 2: MC*, they have completely negated their reward system.

I'm dismayed! Not only have they devalued their product, but they've also insulted my honour and dignity as an accomplished gamer. I have obviously ignored the cheat.

Continued

F

Topic: The difficulty problem

The problem with difficulty is that it disproportionately affects less able gamers. In an average FPS a good gamer should be able to hit what they shoot at most of the time and make it to the next arms cache with ammo and health to spare. An inexperienced gamer may use up most of their ammo and health before they get to the hard bits. I realise these are natural, self-regulating systems, but I fear they are an obstacle to new gamers. Difficulty settings and dynamic adjustments are possible answers but seem crude, currently. Can anyone think of a better way?
freethinker

***Resident Evil* is the worst offender for that, and one of many reasons I dislike the series. I remember in the first or second episode struggling through a frustrating game to finally make it to the end boss, only to find my ammo for my major weapons was so low that I was completely fucked. These days, for solo gaming, I find myself gravitating towards games like RPGs, where if I get stuck at a particularly irritating bit, I can go investigate a side quest and come back later, stronger.**
barren_sky

Changing the difficulty during a game should be made an option. When people hit a brick wall, some like to perservere but others would like the easier option. There's no reason why it shouldn't be open to them. One thing that's always pissed me off is that Hard or Authentic/Extreme game options aren't always available from the start. During an FPS, for example, you only need an hour at the most to get used to the controls and feel of the game. You should be able to crank up the difficulty without having to restart on a hard setting or in a lot of cases, complete the whole thing before you get a chance to.
ScotsWahey

Admittedly, all reward systems in games are arbitrary, illusions created by games designers to allow players to feel as if they're achieving something of consequence, but I like to allow myself to be fooled. I enjoy the challenge set, real or otherwise, but in this case I feel cheapened. I have not since touched the singleplayer game, even though I like to think that I don't play games just to unlock rewards. The game experience itself should be, and usually is, its own reward – but in this case my experience has been marred.
Leo Tan

The role that cheats and FAQs play in gaming is becoming increasingly complex, and is something which we'll look at in an upcoming issue of **Edge**.

Recently I was wondering about why so many non-gamers perceive us to be juvenile, immature sociopaths. Well I got my answer whilst browsing the news section of popular gaming blog Joystiq. I saw the news that Link (the *Twilight Princess* version, obviously) had been voted the sexiest videogame character by a gay magazine. I found this to be a great thing – *Zelda* has broken into the mainstream. Hurrah! People are taking games more seriously. Unfortunately a read through the comments posted by this site's many members proved to me that gamers really are immature and juvenile. "Link has teh ghey" and various other idiotic comments were followed by a string of men claiming they wouldn't touch *Twilight Princess* because of this. That's not even homophobia, it's just pure stupidity. Others claimed that the great name of the franchise had been marred. Of course, there were some mature gamers who saw this as a good thing, and some made rather funny, tasteful jokes. But the juvenile gamers far outnumbered them.

I imagined some newspaper or magazine investigating videogame culture coming across this article and the comments that followed it. And so it dawned on me, the immature stereotype of gamers was definitely not without cause. Because of these ignorant and loud few, sophisticated gamers would be tarred with the same brush. Sigh. Come on guys, grow up already!
David Gormley

Link rather than Sheik? What is the world coming to? And for those looking for more considered commentary, a visit to www.edge-online.com will reveal a rather more sophisticated range of contributors.

Send us email (**edge@futurenet.co.uk**), but be sure to use 'Inbox' as the subject line. Or send a letter to this address: Inbox, **Edge**, Future Publishing, 30 Monmouth Street, Bath BA1 2BW

F

Topic: Engraved in your mind
Anyone else here still remember, for some stupid reason, the cheat button combos of old games?
equinox_code

GABBAGABBAHEY
lightswitch sam

DURAL
superflyninja

Justin Bailey
Pause

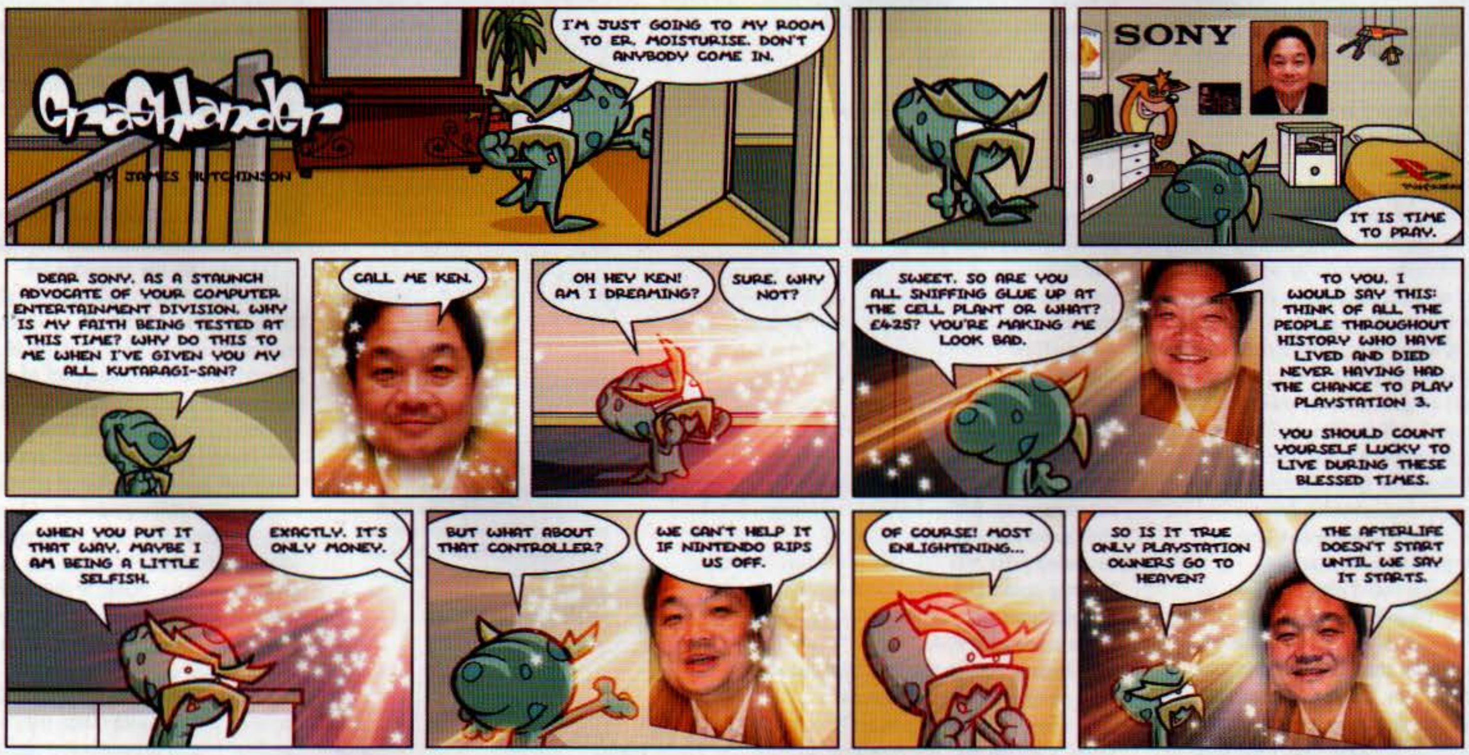
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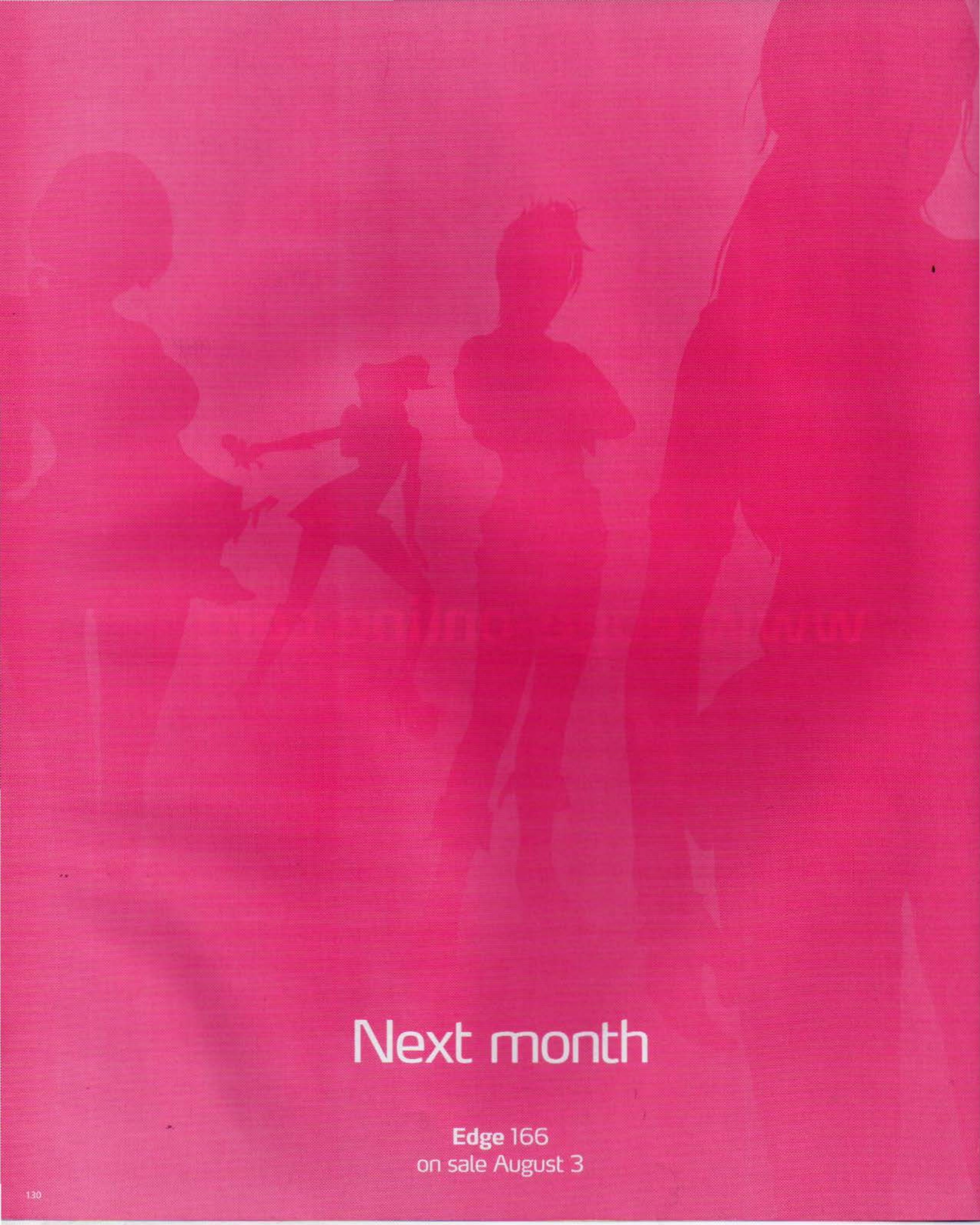
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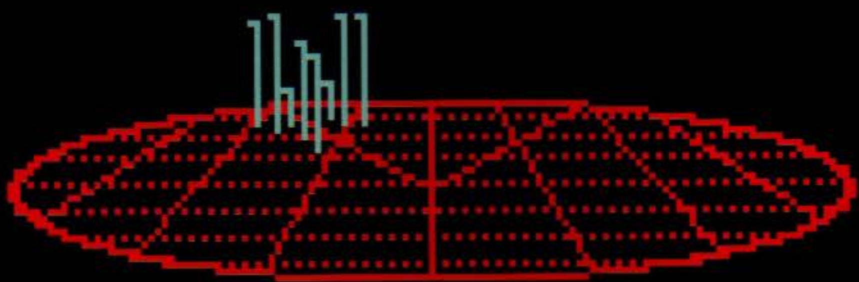


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